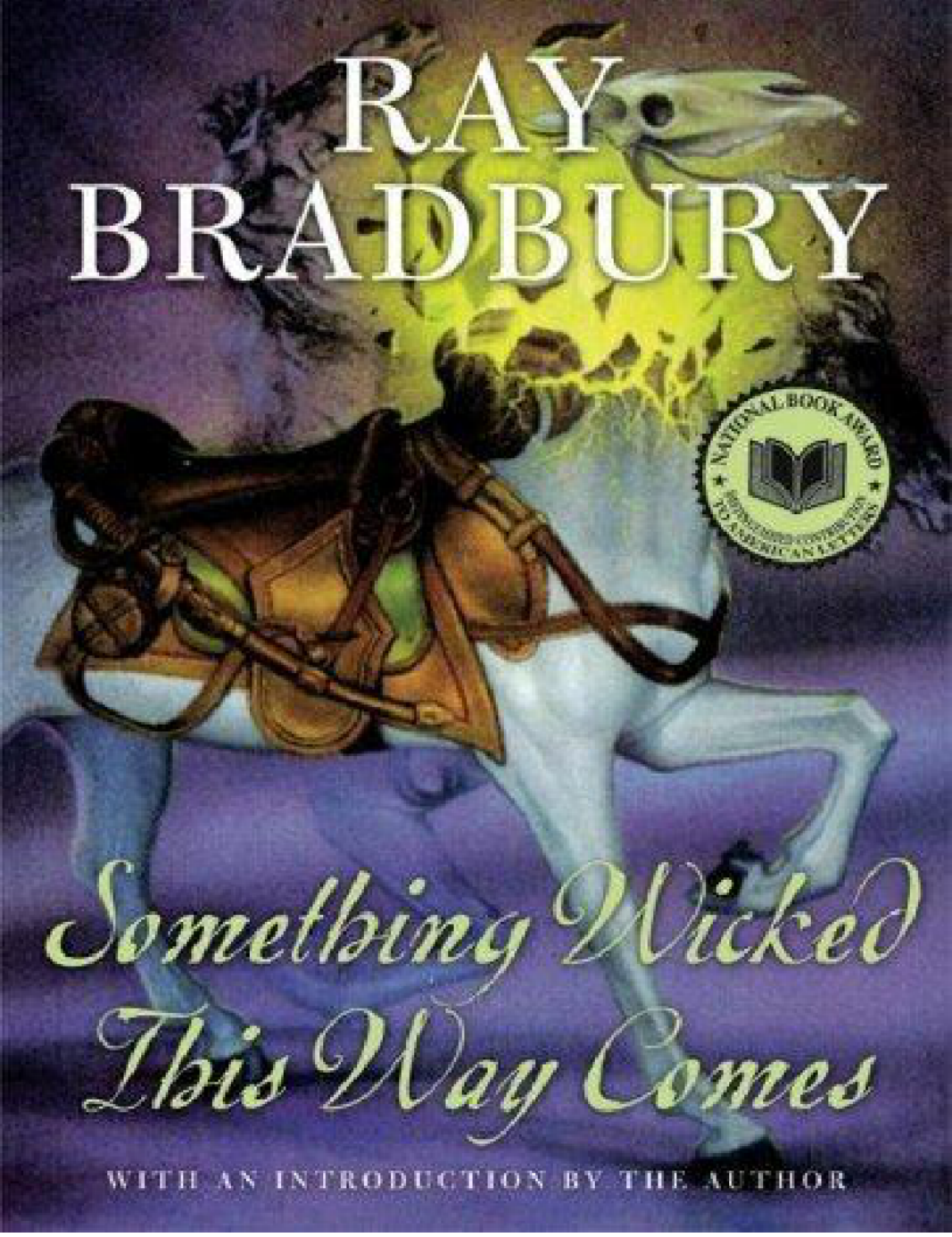
RAY
BRADBURY
NATIONAL BOOK AWARD
Something Wicked
This Way Comes
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

Something Wicked This Way Comes

Ray Bradbury

HarperCollins (1999)

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Summary:

A masterpiece of modern Gothic literature, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* is the memorable story of two boys, James Nightshade and William Halloway, and the evil that grips their small Midwestern town with the arrival of a "dark carnival" one Autumn midnight. How these two innocents, both age 13, save the souls of the town (as well as their own), makes for compelling reading on timeless themes. What would *you* do if your secret wishes could be granted by the mysterious ringmaster Mr. Dark? Bradbury excels in revealing the dark side that exists in us all, teaching us ultimately to celebrate the shadows rather than fear them. In many ways, this is a companion piece to his joyful, nostalgia-drenched __, in which Bradbury presented us with one perfect summer as seen through the eyes of a 12-year-old. In *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, he deftly explores the fearsome delights of one perfectly terrifying, unforgettable autumn. --*Stanley Wiater*

From Library Journal

Something Wicked is Avon's latest installment in its ongoing series of reprints of Bradbury's works in quality yet affordable hardcover editions. Appearing in 1962, this is the story of a diabolical carnival that wreaks havoc on the lives of the people of a small Illinois town, much like the one in which Bradbury grew up. This edition also sports a new afterword by the author.

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Something Wicked This Way Comes

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PROLOGUE

First of all, it was October, a rare month for boys. Not that all months aren't rare. But there be bad abd good, as the pirates say. Take September, a bad month: schoool begins. Consider August, a good month: school hasn't begun yet. July, well, July's really fine: there's no chance in the world for school. June, no doubting it, June's best of all, for the school doors spring wide and September's a billion years away.

But you take October, now. School's been on a month and you're riding easier in the reins, jogging along. You got time to think of the garbage you'll dump on old man Prickett's porch, or the hairyape costume you'll wear to the YMCA the last night of the month. And if it's around October twentieth and everything smokysmelling and the sky orange and ash grey at twilight, it seems Hallowe'en will never come in a fall of broomsticks and a soft flap of bedsheets around corners.

But one strange wild dark long year, Hallowe'en came early.

One year Hallowe'en came on October 24, three hours after midnight .

At that time, James Nightshade of 97 Oak Street was thirteen years, eleven months, twentythree days old. Next door, William Halloway was thirteen years, eleven months and twentyfour days old. Both touched toward fourteen; it almost trembled in their hands.

And that was the October week when they grew up overnight, and were never so young any more. . .

Something Wicked This Way Comes

I

Arrivals

1

The seller of lightningrods arrived just ahead of the storm. He came along the street of Green Town , Illinois , in the late cloudy October day, sneaking glances over his shoulder. Somewhere not so far back, vast lightnings stomped the earth. Somewhere, a storm like a great beast with terrible teeth could not be denied.

So the salesman jangled and clanged his huge leather kit in which oversized puzzles of ironmongery lay unseen but which his tongue conjured from door to door until he came at last to a lawn which was cut all wrong.

No, not the grass. The salesman lifted his gaze. But two boys, far up the gentle slope, lying on the grass. Of a like size and general shape, the boys sat carving twig whistles, talking of olden or future times, content with having left their fingerprints on every movable object in Green Town during summer past and their footprints on every open path between here and the lake and there and the river since school began.

'Howdy, boys!' called the man all dressed in stormcoloured clothes. 'Folks home?'

The boys shook their heads.

'Got any money, yourselves?'

The boys shook their heads.

'Well - ' The salesman walked about three feet, stopped and hunched his shoulders. Suddenly he seemed aware of house windows or the cold sky staring at his neck. He turned slowly, sniffing the air. Wind rattled the empty trees. Sunlight, breaking through a small rift in the clouds, minted a last few oak leaves all gold. But the sun vanished, the coins were spent, the air blew grey; the salesman shook himself from the spell.

The salesman edged slowly up the lawn.

'Boy, ' he said. 'What's your name?'

And the first boy, with hair as blondwhite as milk thistle, shut up one eye, tilted his head, and looked at the

salesman with a single eye as open, bright and clear as a drop of summer rain.

'Will,' he said. 'William Halloway.'

The storm gentleman turned. 'And you?'

The second boy did not move, but lay stomach down on the autumn grass, debating as if he might make up a name. His hair was wild, thick, and the glossy colour of waxed chestnuts. His eyes, fixed to some distant point within himself, were mint rockcrystal green. At last he put a blade of dry grass in his casual mouth.

'Jim Nightshade,' he said.

The storm salesman nodded as if he had known it all along.

'Nightshade. That's quite a name.'

'And only fitting,' said Will Halloway. 'I was born one minute before midnight , October thirtieth, Jim was born one minute after midnight , which makes it October thirtyfirst.'

'Hallowe'en,' said Jim.

By their voices, the boys had told the tale all their lives, proud of their mothers, living house next to house, running for the hospital together, bringing sons into the world seconds apart; one light, one dark. There was a history of mutual celebration behind them. Each year Will lit the candles on a single cake at one minute to midnight . Jim, at one minute after, with the last day of the month begun, blew them out.

So much Will said, excitedly. So much Jim agreed to, silently. So much the salesman, running before the storm, but poised here uncertainly, heard looking from face to face.

'Halloway. Nightshade. No money, you say?'

The man, grieved by his own conscientiousness, rummaged in his leather bag and seized forth an iron contraption.

'Take this, free! Why? One of those houses will be struck by lightning! Without this rod, bang! Fire and ash, roast pork and cinders! Grab!'

The salesman released the rod. Jim did not move. But Will caught the iron and gasped.

'Boy, it's heavy! And funnylooking. Never seen a lightningrod like this. Look, Jim!'

And Jim, at last, stretched like a cat, and turned his head. His green eyes got big and then very narrow.

The metal thing was hammered and shaped halfcrescent, halfcross. Around the rim of the main rod little

curlicues and doohingies had been soldered on, later. The entire surface of the rod was finely scratched and etched with strange languages, names that could tie the tongue or break the jaw, numerals that added to incomprehensible sums, pictographs of insectanimals all bristle, chaff, and claw.

'That's Egyptian.' Jim pointed his nose at a bug soldered to the iron. 'Scarab beetle.'

'So it is, boy!'

Jim squinted. 'And those there - Phoenician hen tracks,'

'Right!'

'Why?' asked Jim.

'Why?' said the man. 'Why the Egyptian, Arabic, Abyssinian, Choctaw? Well, what tongue does the wind talk? What nationality is a storm? What country do rains come from? What colour is lightning? Where does thunder go when it dies? Boys, you got to be ready in every dialect with every shape and form to hex the St Elmo's fires, the balls of blue light that prowl the earth like sizzling cats. I got the only lightningrods in the world that hear, feel, know, and sass back any storm, no matter what tongue, voice, or sign. No foreign thunder so loud this rod can't softtalk it!'

But Will was staring beyond the man now.

'Which,' he said. 'Which house will it strike?'

'Which? Hold on. Wait.' The salesman searched deep in their faces. 'Some folks draw lightning, suck it like cats suck babies' breath. Some folks' polarities are negative, some positive. Some glow in the dark. Some snuff out. You now, the two. . .I - '

'What makes you so sure lightning will strike anywhere around here?' said Jim suddenly, his eyes bright.

The salesman almost flinched. 'Why, I got a nose, an eye, an ear. Both those houses, their timbers! Listen!'

They listened. Maybe their houses leaned under the cool afternoon wind. Maybe not.

'Lightning needs channels, like rivers, to run in. One of those attics is a dry river bottom, itching to let lightning pour through! Tonight!'

'Tonight?' Jim sat up happily.

'No ordinary storm!' said the salesman. 'Tom Fury tells you. Fury, ain't that a fine name for one who sells lightningrods? Did I take the name? No! Did the name fire me to my occupations? Yes! Grown up, I saw cloudy fires jumping the world, making men hop and hide. Thought: I'll chart hurricanes, map storms, then run ahead shaking my

iron cudgels, my miraculous defenders, in my fists! I've shielded and made snugsafe one hundred thousand, count 'em, Godfearing homes. So when I tell you, boys, you're in dire need, listen! Climb that roof, nail this rod high, ground it in the good earth before nightfall!'

'But which house, which!' asked Will.

The salesman reared off, blew his nose in a great kerchief, then walked slowly across the lawn as if approaching a huge timebomb that ticked silently there.

He touched Will's front porch newels, ran his hand over a post, a floorboard, then shut his eyes and leaned against the house to let its bones speak to him.

Then, hesitant, he made his cautious way to Jim's house next door.

Jim stood up to watch.

The salesman put his hand out to touch, to stroke, to quiver his fingertips on the old paint.

'This,' he said at last, 'is the one.'

Jim looked proud.

Without looking back, the salesman said, 'Jim Nightshade, this your place?'

'Mine,' said Jim.

'I should've known,' said the man.

'Hey, what about me?' said Will.

The salesman snuffed again at Will's house. 'No, no. Oh, a few sparks'll jump on your rainspouts. But the real show's next

door here, at the Nightshades'! Well!'

The salesman hurried back across the lawn to seize his huge leather bag.

'I'm on my way. Storm's coming. Don't wait, Jim boy. Otherwise - bamm! You'll be found, your nickels, dimes and Indianheads fused by electroplating. Abe Lincolns melted into Miss Columbias, eagles plucked raw on the backs of quarters, all run to quicksilver in your jeans. More! Any boy hit by lightning, lift his lid and there on his eyeball, pretty as the Lord's prayer on a pin, find the last scene the boy ever saw! A boxBrownie photo, by God, of that fire climbing down the sky to blow You like a penny whistle, suck your soul back up along the bright stair! Git, boy! Hammer it high or you're dead come dawn!'

And jangling his case full of iron rods, the salesman wheeled about and charged down the walk blinking wildly at the sky, the roof, the trees, at last closing his eyes, moving,

sniffing, muttering. 'Yes, bad, here it comes, feel it, way off now, but running fast. . .'

And the man in the stormdark clothes was gone, his cloudcoloured hat pulled down over his eyes, and the trees rustled and the sky seemed very old suddenly and Jim and Will stood testing the wind to see if they could smell electricity, the lightningrod fallen between them.

'Jim,' said Will. 'Don't stand there. Your house, he said. You going to nail up the rod or ain't you?'

'No,' smiled Jim. 'Why spoil the fun?'

'Fun! You crazy? I'll get the ladder! You the hammer, some nails and wire!'

But Jim did not move. Will broke and ran. He came back with the ladder.

'Jim. Think of your mom. You want her burnt?'

Will climbed the side of the house, alone, and looked down.

Slowly, Jim moved to the ladder below and started up.

Thunder sounded far off in the cloudshadowed hills.

The air smelled fresh and raw on top of Jim Nightshade's roof.

Even Jim admitted that.

2

There's nothing in the living world like books on watercures, deathsofathousandslices, or pouring whitehot lava off castle walls on drolls and mountebanks.

So said Jim Nightshade, that's all he read. If it wasn't how to burgle the First National, it was, how to build catapults, or shape black bumbershoots into lurking bat costumes for Cabbage Night.

Jim breathed it out all fine.

And Will, he breathed it in.

With the lightningrod nailed to Jim's roof, Will proud, and Jim ashamed of what he considered mutual cowardice, it was late in the day. Supper over, it was time for their weekly jog to the library.

Like all boys, they never walked anywhere, but named a goal and lit for it, scissors and elbows. Nobody won. Nobody wanted to win. It was in their friendship they just wanted to run forever, shadow and shadow. Their hands slapped librarydoor handles together, their chests broke track tapes together, their tennis shoes beat parallel pony tracks

over lawns, trimmed bushes, squirrelled trees, no one losing, both winning, thus saving their friendship for other times of loss.

So it was on this night that blew warm, then cool, as they let the wind take them downtown at eight o'clock . They felt the wings on their fingers and elbows flying, then, suddenly plunged in new sweeps of air, the clear autumn river flung them headlong where they must go.

Up step, three, six, nine, twelve! Slap! Their palms hit the library door.

Jim and Will grinned at each other. It was all so good, these blowing quiet October nights and the library waiting inside now with its greenshaded lamps and papyrus dust.

Jim listened. 'What's that?'

'What, the wind?'

'Like music. . .' Jim squinted at the horizon.

'Don't hear no music.'

Jim shook his head. 'Gone. Or it wasn't even there. Come on!'

They opened the door and stepped in.

They stopped.

The library deeps lay waiting for them.

Out in the world, not much happened. But here in the special night, a land bricked with paper and leather, anything might happen, always did. Listen! and you heard ten thousand people screaming so high only dogs feathered their ears. A million folk ran toting cannons, sharpening guillotines; Chinese, four abreast, marched on forever. Invisible, silent, yes, but Jim and Will had the gift of ears and noses as well as the gift of tongues. This was a factory of spices from far countries. Here alien deserts slumbered. Up front was the desk where the nice old lady, Miss Watriss, purplestamped your books, but down off away were Tibet and Antarctica , the Congo . There went Miss Wills, the other librarian, through Outer Mongolia , calmly toting fragments of Peiping and Yokohama and the Celebes . Way down the third book corridor, an oldish man whispered his broom along in the dark, mounding the fallen. . . .

Will stared.

It was always a surprise - that old man, his work, his name.

That's Charles William Halloway, thought Will, not grandfather, not farwandering, ancient uncle, as some might think, but. . .my father.

So, looking back down the corridor, was Dad shocked to see he owned a son who visited this separate 20,000-fathomsdeep world? Dad always seemed stunned when Will rose up before him, as if they had met a lifetime ago and one had grown old while the other stayed young, and this fact stood between. . . .

Far off, the old man smiled.

They approached each other, carefully.

'Is that you, Will? Grown an inch since this morning.' Charles Halloway shifted his gaze. 'Jim? Eyes darker, cheeks paler; you bum yourself at both ends, Jim?'

'Heck.' said Jim.

'No such place as Heck. But hell's right here under 'A' for Alighieri.'

'Allegory's beyond me,' said Jim.

'How stupid of me,' Dad laughed. 'I mean Dante. Look at this. Pictures by Mister Doré, showing all the aspects. Hell never looked better. Here's souls sunk to their gills in slime. There's someone upside down, wrong side out.'

'Boy howdy!' Jim eyed the pages two different ways and thumbed on. 'Got any dinosaur pictures?'

Dad shook his head. 'That's over in the next aisle.' He strolled them around and reached out. 'Here we are: Pterodactyl, Kite of Destruction! or what about Drums of Doom: The Saga of the Thunder Lizards! Pep you up, Jim?'

'I'm pepped!'

Dad winked at Will. Will winked back. They stood now, a boy with corncoloured hair and a man with moonwhite hair, a boy with a summerapple, a man with a winterapple face. Dad, Dad, thought Will, why, why, he looks. . .like me in a smashed mirror!

And suddenly Will remembered nights rising at two in the morning to go to the bathroom and spying across town to see that one single light in the high library window and know Dad had lingered on late murmuring and reading alone under these green jungle lamps. It made Will sad and funny to see that light, to know the old man - he stopped to change the word - his father, was here in all this shadow.

'Will,' said the old man who was also a janitor who happened to be his father, 'what about you?'

'Huh?' Will shook himself.

'You need a whitehat or a blackhat book?'

'Hats?' said Will.

'Well, Jim - ' they perambulated, Dad running his

fingers along the book spines - 'he wears the black tengallon hats and reads books to fit. Middle name's Moriarty, right, Jim? Any day now he'll move up from Fu Manchu to Machiavelli here - mediumsize dark fedora. Or over along to Dr Faustus - extra large black Stetson. That leaves the whitehat boys to you, Will. Here's Gandhi. Next door is St Thomas. And on the next level, well. . .Buddha.'

'You don't mind,' said Will, 'I'll settle for The Mysterious Island.'

'What,' asked Jim, scowling, 'is all this talk about white and black hats?'

'Why - ' Dad handed Jules Verne to Will - 'it's just, a long time ago, I had to decide, myself, which colour I'd wear.'

'So,' said Jim, 'which did you pick?'

Dad looked surprised. Then he laughed uneasily.

'Since you need to ask, Jim, you make me wonder. Will, tell Mom I'll be home soon. Get out of here, both of you. Miss Watriss!' he called softly to the librarian at the desk. 'Dinosaurs and mysterious islands, coming up!'

The door slammed.

Outside, a weather of stars ran clear in an ocean sky.

'Heck.' Jim sniffed north, Jim sniffed south. 'Where's the storm? That darn salesman promised. I just got to watch that lightning fizz down my drainpipes!'

Will let the wind ruffle and refit his clothes, his skin, his hair. Then he said, faintly, 'It'll be here. By morning.'

'Who says?'

'The huckleberries all down my arms. They say.'

'Great!'

The wind flew Jim away.

A similar kite, Will swooped to follow.

3

Watching the boys vanish away, Charles Halloway suppressed a sudden urge to run with them, make the pack. He knew what the wind was doing to them where it was taking them, to all the secret places that were never so secret again in life. Somewhere in him, a shadow turned mournfully over. You had to run with a night like this, so the sadness could not hurt.

Look! he thought. Will runs because running is its own excuse. Jim runs because something's up ahead of him.

Yet, strangely, they do run together.

What's the answer, he wondered, walking through the library, putting out the lights, putting out the lights, putting out the lights, is it all in the whorls on our thumbs and fingers? Why are some people all grasshopper fiddlings, scrapings, all antennae shivering, one big ganglion eternally knotting, slipknotting, squareknotting themselves? They stoke a furnace all their lives, sweat their lips, shine their eyes and start it all in the crib. Caesar's lean and hungry friends. They eat the dark, who only stand and breathe.

That's Jim, all bramblehair and itchweed.

And Will? Why he's the last peach, high on the summer tree. Some boys walk by and you cry, seeing them. They feel good, they look good, they are good. Oh, they're not above peeing off a bridge, or stealing an occasional dimestore pencil sharpener; it's not that. It's just, you know, seeing them pass, that's how they'll be all their life; they'll get hit, hurt, cut, bruised, and always wonder why, why does it happen? how can it happen to them?

But Jim, now, he knows it happens, he watches for it happening, he sees it start, he sees it finish, he licks the wound he expected, and never asks why; he knows. He always knew. Someone knew before him, a long time ago, someone who had wolves for pets and lions for night conversants. Hell, Jim doesn't know with his mind. But his body knows. And while Will's putting a bandage on his latest scratch, Jim's ducking, waving, bouncing away from the knockout blow which must inevitably come.

So there they go, Jim running slower to stay with Will, Will running faster to stay with Jim, Jim breaking two windows in a haunted house because Will's along, Will breaking one instead of none, because Jim's watching. God how we get our fingers in each other's clay. That's friendship, each playing the potter to see what shapes we can make of the other.

Jim, Will, he thought, strangers. Go on. I'll catch up, some day. . . .

The library door gasped open, slammed.

Five minutes later, he turned into the corner saloon for his nightly oneandonly drink, in time to hear a man say:

'. . .I read when alcohol was invented, the Italians thought it was the big thing they'd been looking for for centuries. The Elixir of Life! Did you know that?

'No.' The bartender's back was turned.

'Sure.' the man went on. 'Distilled wine. Ninth, tenth

century. Looked like water. But it burnt. I mean, it not only burnt the mouth and stomach, but you could set it on fire. So they thought they'd mixed water and fire. Firewater, the Elixir Vitae, by God. Maybe they weren't so far wrong thinking it was the Cureall, the thing that worked miracles. Have a drink!?'

'I don't need it,' said Halloway. 'But someone inside me does.'

'Who?'

The boy I once was, thought Halloway, who runs like the leaves down the sidewalk autumn nights.

But he couldn't say that.

So he drank, eyes shut, listening to hear if that thing inside turned over again, rustling in the deep bons that were stacked for burning but never burned.

4

Will stopped. Will looked at the Friday night town.

It seemed when the first stroke of nine banged from the big courthouse clock all the lights were on and business humming in the shops. But by the time the last stroke of nine shook everyone's fillings in his teeth, the barbers had yanked off the sheets, powdered the customers, trotted them forth; the druggist's fount had stopped fizzing like a nest of snakes, the insect neons everywhere had ceased buzzing, and the vast glittering acreage of the dime store with its ten billion metal, glass and paper oddments waiting to be fished over, suddenly blacked out. Shades slithered, doors boomed, keys rattled their bones in locks, people fled with hordes of torn newspaper mice nibbling their heels.

Bang! they were gone!

'Boy!' yelled Will. 'Folks run like they thought the storm was here!'

'It is!' shouted Jim. 'Us!'

They stomppoundthundered over iron grates, steel trapdoors, past a dozen unlit shops, a dozen halflit, a dozen dying dark. The city was dead as they rounded the United Cigar Store corner to see a wooden Cherokee glide in darkness, by himself.

'Hey!'

Mr Tetley, the proprietor, peered over the Indian's shoulder.

'Scare you, boys?'

'Naw!'

But Will shivered, feeling cold tidal waves of strange rain moving down the prairie as on a deserted shore. When the lightning nailed the town, he wanted to be layered under sixteen blankets and a pillow.

'Mr Tetley?' said Will, quietly.

For now there were two wooden Indians upright in ripe tobacco darkness. Mr Tetley, amidst his jest, had frozen, mouth open, listening.

'Mr Tetley?'

He heard something far away on the wind, but couldn't say what it was.

The boys backed off.

He did not see them. He did not move. He only listened.

They left him. They ran.

In the fourth empty block from the library, the boys came upon a third wooden Indian.

Mr Crosetti, in front of his barber shop, his door key in his trembling fingers, did not see them stop.

What had stopped them?

A teardrop.

It moved shining down Mr Crosetti's left cheek. He breathed heavily.

'Crosetti, you fool! Something happens, nothing happens, you cry like a baby!'

Mr Crosetti took a trembling breath, snuffing. 'Don't you smell it?'

Jim and Will sniffed.

'Licorice!'

'Heck, no. Cotton candy!'

'I haven't smelled that in years,' said Mr Crosetti.

Jim snorted. 'It's around.'

'Yes, but who notices? When? Now, my nose tells me, breathe! And I'm crying. Why? Because I remember how a long time ago, boys ate that stuff. Why haven't I stopped to think and smell the last thirty years?'

'You're busy, Mr Crosetti,' Will said. 'You haven't got time.'

Mr Crosetti wiped his eyes. 'Where does that smell come from? There's no place in town sells cotton candy. Only circuses.'

'Hey,' said Will. 'That's right!'

'Well, Crosetti is done crying.' The barber blew his nose

and turned to lock his shop door. As he did this, Will watched the barber's pole whirl its red serpentine up out of nothing, leading his gaze around, rising to vanish into more nothing. On countless moons Will had stood here trying to unravel that ribbon, watch it come, go, end without ending.

Mr Crosetti put his hand to the light switch under the spinning pole.

'Don't,' said Will. Then, murmuring, 'Don't turn it off.' Mr Crosetti looked at the pole, as if freshly aware of its miraculous properties. He nodded, gently, his eyes soft. 'Where does it come from, where does it go, eh? Who knows? Not you, not him, not me. Oh, the mysteries, by God. So. We'll leave it on!'

It's good to know, thought Will, it'll be running until dawn, winding up from nothing, winding away to nothing, while we sleep.

'Goodnight!'

'Goodnight.'

And they left him behind in a wind that very faintly smelled of licorice and cotton candy.

5

Charles Halloway put his hand to the saloon's double swing doors, hesitant, as if the grey hairs on the back of his hand, like antennae, had felt something beyond slide by in the October night. Perhaps great fires burned somewhere and their furnace blasts warned him not to step forth. Or another Ice Age had loomed across the land, its freezing bulk might already have laid waste a billion people in the hour. Perhaps Time itself fixed was draining off down an immense glass, with powdered darkness failing after to bury all.

Or maybe it was only that man in a dark suit, seen through the saloon window, across the street. Great paper rolls under one arm, a brush and bucket in his free hand, the man was whistling a tune, very far away.

It was a tune from another season, one that never ceased making Charles Halloway sad when he heard it. The song was incongruous for October, but immensely moving, overwhelming, no matter what day or what month it was sung:

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,

And wild and sweet
Their words repeat great
Of peace on earth, good will to men!

Charles Halloway shivered. Suddenly there was the old sense of terrified elation, of wanting to laugh and cry together when he saw the innocents of the earth wandering the snowy streets the day before Christmas among all the tired men and women whose faces were dirty with guilt, unwashed of sin, and smashed like small windows by life that hit without warning, ran, hid, came back and hit again.

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
'God is not dead, nor doth He sleep!
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men!'

The whistling died.

Charles Halloway stepped out. Far up ahead, the man who had whistled the tune was motioning his arms by a telegraph pole, silently working. Now he vanished into the open door of a shop.

Charles Halloway, not knowing why, crossed the street to watch the man pasting up one of the posters inside the unrented and empty store.

Now the man stepped out the door with his brush, his paste bucket, his rolled papers. His eyes, a fierce and lustful shine, fixed on Charles Halloway. Smiling, he gestured an open hand.

Halloway stared.

The palm of that hand was covered with fine black silken hair. It looked like -

The hand clenched, tight. It waved. The man swept around the corner. Charles Halloway, stunned, flushed with sudden summer heat, swayed, then turned to gaze into the empty shop.

Two sawhorses stood parallel to each other under a single spotlight.

Placed over these two sawhorses like a funeral of snow and crystal was a block of ice six feet long. It shone dimly with its own effulgence, and its colour was light greenblue. It was a great cool gem resting there in the dark.

On a little white placard at one side near the window

the following calligraphic message could be read by lamplight:

Cooger & Dark's Pandemonium Shadow Show -
Fantoccini, Marionette Circus, and Your
Plain Meadow Carnival. Arriving
Immediately! Here on Display, one of
our many attractions:

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN THE WORLD

Halloway's eyes leaped to the poster on the inside of the window.

And back to the cold long block of ice.

It was such a block of ice as he remembered from travelling magician's shows when he was a boy, when the local ice company contributed a chunk of winter in which, for twelve hours on end, frost maidens lay embedded, on display while people watched and comedies toppled down the raw white screen and coming attractions came and went and at last the pale ladies slid forth all rimed, chipped free by perspiring sorcerers to be led off smiling into the dark behind the curtains.

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN THE WORLD

And yet this vast chunk of wintry glass held nothing but frozen river water.

No. Not quite empty.

Halloway felt his heart pound one special time.

Within the huge winter gem was there not a special vacuum? a voluptuous hollow, a prolonged emptiness which undulated from tip to toe of the ice? and wasn't this vacuum, this emptiness waiting to be filled with summer flesh, was it not shaped somewhat like a. . .woman?

Yes.

The ice. And the lovely hollows, the horizontal flow of emptiness within the ice. The lovely nothingness. The exquisite flow of an invisible mermaid daring the ice to capture it.

The ice was cold.

The emptiness within the ice was warm.

He wanted to go away from here.

But Charles Halloway stood in the strange night for a

long time looking in at the empty shop and the two sawhorses and the cold waiting arctic coffin set there like a vast Star of India in the dark. . . .

6

Jim Nightshade stopped at the comer of Hickory and Main, breathing easily, his eyes fixed tenderly on the leafy darkness of Hickory Street.

'Will. . .?'

'No!' Will stopped, surprised at his own violence.

'It is just there. The fifth house. Just one minute, Will,' Jim pleaded, softly.

'Minute. . .?' Will glanced down the street.

Which was the street of the Theatre.

Until this summer it had been an ordinary street where they stole peaches, plums and apricots, each in its day. But late in August, while they were monkeyclimbing for the sourest apples, the 'thing' happened which changed the houses, the taste of the fruit, and the very air within the gossiping trees.

'Will! it's waiting. Maybe something's happening!' hissed Jim.

Maybe something is. Will swallowed hard, and felt Jim's hand pinch his arm.

For it was no longer the street of the apples or plums or apricots, it was the one house with a window at the side and this window, Jim said, was a stage, with a curtain - the shade, that is - up. And in that room, on that strange stage, were the actors, who spoke mysteries, mouthed wild things, laughed, sighed, murmured so much; so much of it was whispers Will did not understand.

'Just one last time, Will.'

'You know it won't be last!'

Jim's face was flushed, his cheeks blazing, his eyes greenglass fire. He thought of that night, them picking the apples, Jim suddenly crying softly, 'Oh, there!'

And Will, hanging to the limbs of the tree, tightpressed, terribly excited, staring in at the Theatre, that peculiar stage where people, all unknowing, flourished shirts above their heads, let fall clothes to the rug, stood raw and animalcrazy, naked, like shivering horses, hands out to touch each other.

'What're they doing I thought Will. Why are they laughing? What's wrong with them, what's wrong!?

He wished the light would go out.

But he hung tight to the suddenly slippery tree and watched the bright window Theatre, heard the laughing and numb at last let go, slid, fell, lay dazed, then stood in dark gazing up at Jim, who still clung to his high limb. Jim's face, hearthflushed, cheeks firefuzzed, lips parted, stared in. 'Jim, Jim come down!' But Jim did not hear. 'Jim!' And when Jim looked down at last he saw Will as a stranger below with some silly request to give off living and come down to earth. So Will ran off, alone, thinking too much, knowing what to think.

'Will, please. . .'

Will looked at Jim now, with the library books in his hands.

'We been to the library. Ain't that enough?'

Jim shook his head. 'Carry these for me.'

He handed Will his books and trotted softly off under the hissing whispering trees. Tlree houses down he called back: 'Will? Know what you are? A darn old dimwit Episcopal Baptist!'

Then Jim was gone.

Will seized the books tight to his chest. They were wet from the hands.

Don't look back! he thought.

I won't! I won't!

And looking only toward home, he walked that way.

Quickly.

7

Halfway home, Will felt a shadow breathing hard behind him.

'Theatre dosed?' said Will, not looking back.

Jim walked in silence beside him for a long while and then said, 'Nobody home.'

'Swell!'

Jim spat. 'Dam Baptist preacher, you!'

And around the corner a tumbleweed slithered, a great cotton ball of pale paper which bounced, then clung shivering to Jim's legs.

Will grabbed the paper, laughing, pulled it off, let it fly! He stopped laughing.

The boys, watching the pale throwaway rattle and flit through the trees, were suddenly cold.

'Wait a minute. . .' said Jim, slowly.

All of a sudden they were yelling, running, leaping. 'Don't tear it! Careful!

The paper fluttered like a snare drum in their hands.

'COMING, OCTOBER TWENTYFOURTH!'

Their lips moved, shadowing the words set in rococo type.

'Cooger and Dark's. . .'

'Carnival!'

'October twentyfourth! That's tomorrow!'

'It can't be,' said Will. 'All carnivals stop after Labour Day - '

'Who cares? A thousand and one wonders! See! MEPHISTOPHELES, THE LAVA DRINKER! MR ELECTRICO! THE MONSTER MONTGOLFIER?'

'Balloon,' said Will. 'A Montgolfier is a balloon.'

MADEMOISELLE TAROT!' read Jim. 'THE DANGLING MAN. THE DEMON GUILLOTINE! THE ILLUSTRATED MAN! Hey!'

'That's just an old guy With tattoos.'

'No.' Jim breathed warm on the paper. 'He's illustrated. Special. See! Covered with monsters! A menagerie!' Jim's eyes jumped. 'SEE! THE SKELETON! Ain't that fine, Will? Not Thin Man, no, but SKELETON! SEE! THE DUST WITCH! What's a Dust Witch, Will?'

'No.' Jim squinted off, seeing things. 'A Gypsy that was born in the Dust, raised in the Dust, and some day winds up back in the Dust. Here's more: EGYPTIAN MIRROR MAZE! SEE YOURSELF TEN THOUSAND TIMES! SAINT ANTHONY'S TEMPLE 0F TEMPTATION!'

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL - ' read Will.

' - wOMAN IN THE WORLD,' finished JIM.

They looked at each other.

'Can a carnival have the Most Beautiful Woman on Earth in its sideshow, Will?'

'You ever seen carnival ladies, Jim?'

'Grizzly bears. But how come this handbill claims - '

'Oh, shut up!'

'You mad at me, Will?'

'No, it's just - get it!

The wind had tom the paper from their hands.

The handbill blew over the trees and away in an idiot caper, gone.

'It s not true, anyway,' Will gasped. Carnivals don't

come this late in the year. Silly darnsounding thing. Who'd go to it?

'Me.' Jim stood quiet in the dark.

Me, thought Will, seeing the guillotine flash, the Egyptian mirrors unfold accordions of light, and the sulphurskinned devilman sipping lava, like gunpowder tea.

'That music. . .' Jim murmured. 'Calliope. Must be coming tonight!'

'Carnivals come at sunrise.'

"Yeah, but what about the licorice and cotton candy we smelled, close?'

And Will thought of the smells and the sounds flowing on the river of wind from beyond the darkening houses, Mr Tetley listening by his wooden Indian friend, Mr Crosetti with the single tear shining down his cheek, and the barber's pole sliding its red tongue up and around forever out of nowhere and away to eternity.

Will's teeth chattered.

'Let's go home.'

'We are home!' cried Jim, surprised.

For, not knowing it, they had reached their separate houses and now moved up separate walks.

On his porch, Jim leaned over and called softly.

'Will. You're not mad?'

'Heck, no.'

'We won't go by that street, that house, the Theatre, again for a month. A year! I swear.'

'Sure, Jim, sure.'

They stood with their hands on the doorknobs of their houses, and Will looked up at Jim's room where the lightningrod glittered against the cold stars.

The storm was coming. The storm wasn't coming.

No matter which, he was glad Jim had that grand contraption up there.

'Night!'

'Night.'

Their separate doors slammed.

8

Will opened the door and shut it again. Quietly, this time.

'That's better,' said his mother's voice.

Framed through the hall door Will saw the only theatre he cared for now, the familiar stage where sat his father

(home already! he and Jim must have run the long way round!) holding a book but reading the empty spaces. In a chair by the fire mother knitted and hummed like a teakettle.

He wanted to be near and not near them, he saw them close, he saw them far. Suddenly they were awfully small in too large a room in too big a town and much too huge a world. In this unlocked place they seemed at the mercy of anything that might break in from the night.

Including me, Will thought. Including me.

Suddenly he loved them more for their smallness than he ever had when they seemed tall.

His mothers fingers twitched, her mouth counted, the happiest woman he had ever seen. He remembered a greenhouse on a winter day, pushing aside thick jungle leaves to find a creamy pink hothouse rose poised alone in the wilderness. That was mother, smelling like fresh milk, happy, to herself, in this room.

Happy? But how and why? Here, a few feet off, was the janitor, the library man, the stranger, his uniform gone, but his face still the face of a man happier at night alone in the deep marble vaults, whispering his broom in the draughty corridors.

Will watched, wondering why this woman was so happy and this man so sad.

His father stared deep in the fire, one hand relaxed. Halfcupped in that hand lay a crumpled paper ball.

Will blinked.

He remembered the wind blowing the pale handbill skittering in the trees. Now the same colour paper lay crushed, its rococo type hidden, in his father's fingers.

'Hey!'

Will stepped into the parlour.

Immediately Mom opened a smile that was like lighting a second fire.

Dad stricken, looked dismayed, as if caught in a criminal act.

Will wanted to say, 'Hey, what'd you think of the handbill. . .?

But Dad was crammmg the handbill deep in the chair upholstery.

And mother was leafing the library books.

'Oh, these are fine, Willy!'

So Will just stood with Cooger and Dark on his tongue and said:

'Boy, the wind really flew us home. Streets full of paper blowing.'

Dad did not flinch at this.

'Anything new, Dad?'

Dad's hand still lay tucked in the side of the chair. He lifted a grey, slightly worried, very tired gaze to his son:

'Stone lion blew off the library steps. Prowling the town now looking for Christians. Won't find any. Got the only one no in captivity here, and she's a good cook.'

'Bosh,' said Mom.

Walking upstairs, Will heard what he half expected to hear.

A soft fluming sigh as something fresh was tossed on the fire. In his mind, he saw Dad standing at the hearth looking down as the paper crinkled to ash:

'. . .COOGER . . . DARK . . . CARNIVAL . . . WITCH . . . WONDERS. . .'

He wanted to go back down and stand with Dad hands out, to be warmed by the fire.

Instead he went slowly up to shut the door of his room.

Some nights, abed, Will put his ear to the wall to listen, and if his folks talked things that were right, he stayed, and if not right he turned away. If it was about time and passing years or himself or town or just the general inconclusive way God ran the world, he listened warmly, comfortably, secretly, for it was usually Dad talking. He could not often speak with Dad anywhere in the world, inside or out, but this was different. There was a thing in Dad's voice, up, over, down, easy as a hand winging soft in the air like a white bird describing flight pattern, made the ear want to follow and the mind's eye to see.

And the odd thing in Dad's voice was the sound truth makes being said. The sound of truth, in a wild roving land of city or plain country lies, will spell any boy. Many nights Will drowsed this way, his senses like stopped clocks long before that halfsinging voice was still. Dad's voice was a midnight school, teaching deep fathom hours, and the subject was life.

So it was this night, Will's eyes shut, head leaned to the cool plaster. At first Dad's voice, a Congo drum, boomed softly, horizons away. Mother's voice, she used her waterbright soprano in the Baptist choir, did not sing, yet sang back replies. Will imagined Dad sprawled talking to the

empty ceiling:

'. . .Will. . .makes me feel so old. . .a man should play baseball with his son. . .'

'Not necessary,' said the woman's voice, kindly. 'You're a good man.'

' - in a bad season. Hell, I was forty when he was born! And you! Who's your daughter? people say. God, when you lie down your thoughts turn to mush. Hell!'

Will heard the shift of weight as Dad sat up in the dark. A match was being struck, a pipe was being smoked. The wind rattled the windows.

'. . .man with poster under his arm. . .'

'. . .carnival. . . ' said his mother's voice, '. . .this late in the year?'

Will wanted to turn away, but couldn't.

'. . .most beautiful. . .woman. . .in the world,' Dad's voice murmured.

Mother laughed softly. 'You know I'm not.'

No! thought Will, that's from the handbill! Why doesn't Dad tell!!?

Because, Will answered himself. Something's going on. Oh, something is going on!

Will saw that paper frolicked in the trees, its words THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN, and fever prickled his cheeks. He thought: Jim, the street of the Theatre, the naked people in the stage of that Theatre window, crazy as Chinese opera, darn odd crazy as old Chinese opera, judo, jujitsu, Indian puzzles, and now his father's voice, dreaming off, sad, sadder, saddest, much too much to understand. And suddenly he was scared because Dad wouldn't talk about the handbill he had secretly burned. Will gazed out the window. There! Like a milkweed plume! White paper danced in the air.

'No,' he whispered, 'no carnival's coming this late. It can't!' He hid under the covers, switched on his flashlight, opened a book. The first picture he saw was a prehistoric reptile trapdrumming a night sky a million years lost.

Heck, he thought, in the rush I got Jim's book he's got one of mine.

But it was a pretty fine reptile.

And flying toward sleep, he thought he heard his father, restless, below. The front door shut. His father was going back to work late, for no reason, with brooms, or books, downtown, away. . .away. . .

And mother asleep, content, not knowing he had gone.

No one else in the world had a name came so well off the tongue.

'Jim Nightshade. That's me.'

Jim stood tall and now lay long in bed, strung together by marshgrass, his bones easy in his flesh, his flesh easy on his bones. The library books lay unopenedby his relaxed right hand.

Waiting, his eyes were dark as twilight, with shadows under the eyes from the time, his mother said, he had almost died when he was three and still remembered. His hair was dark autumn chestnut and the veins in his temples and brow and in his neck and ticking in his wrists and on the backs of his slender hands, all these were dark blue. He was marbled with dark, was Jim Nightshade, a boy who talked less and smiled less as the years increased.

The trouble with Jim was he looked at the world and could not look away. And when you never look away all your life, by the time you are thirteen you have done twenty years taking in the laundry of the world.

Will Halloway, it was in him young to always look just beyond, over or to one side. So at thirteen he had saved up only six years of staring.

Jim knew every centimetre of his shadow, could have cut it out of tar paper, furled it, and run it up a flagpole - his banner.

Will, he was occasionally surprised to see his shadow following him somewhere, but that was that.

'Jim? You awake?'

'Hi, Mom.'

A door opened and now shut. He felt her weight on the bed.

'Why, Jim, your hands are ice. You shouldn't have the window so high. Mind your health.'

'Sure.'

'Don't say “sure” that way. You don't know until you've had three children and lost all but one.'

'Never going to have any,' said Jim.

'You just say that.'

'I know it. I know everything.'

She waited a moment. 'What do you know?'

'No use making more People. People die.'

His voice was very calm and quiet and almost sad.

'That's everything.'

'Almost everything. You're here, Jim. If you weren't, I'd have given up long ago.'

'Mom.' A long silence. 'Can you remember Dad's face? Do I look like him?'

'The day you go away is the day he leaves forever.'

'Who's going away?'

'Why, just lying there, Jim, you run so fast. I never saw anyone move so much, just sleeping. Promise me, Jim. Wherever you go and come back, bring lots of kids. Let them run wild. Let me spoil them, some day.

'I'm never going to own anything can hurt me.'

'You going to collect rocks, Jim? No, some day, you've got to be hurt.'

'No, I don't'

He looked at her. Her face had been hit a long time ago. The bruises had never gone from around her eyes.

'You'll live and get hurt,' she said, in the dark. 'But when it's time, tell me. Say goodbye. Otherwise, I might not let you go. Wouldn't that be terrible, to just grab ahold?'

She rose up suddenly and went to put the window down.

'Why do boys want their windows open wide?'

'Warm blood.'

'Warm blood.' She stood alone. 'That's the story of all our sorrows. And don't ask why.

The door shut.

Jim alone, raised the window, and leaned into the absolutely clear night.

Storm, he thought, you there?

Yes.

Feel. . .away to the west. . .a real humdinger, rushing along!

The shadow of the lightningrod lay in the drive below.

He sucked in cold air, gave out a vast exhilaration of heat.

Why, he thought, why don't I climb up, knock that lightningrod loose, throw it away?

And then see what happens?

Yes.

And then see what happens!

Just after midnight.

Shuffling footsteps.

Along the empty street came the lightningrod salesman, his leather valise swung almost empty in his baseballmitt hand, his face at ease. He turned a corner and stopped.

Papersoft white moths tapped at an empty store window, looking in.

And in the window, like a great coffin boat of starcoloured glass, beached on two sawhorses lay a chunk of Alaska Snow Company ice chopped to a size great enough to flash in a giant's ring.

And sealed in this ice was the most beautiful woman in the world.

The lightningrod salesman's smile faded.

In the dreaming coldness of ice like someone fallen and slept in snow avalanches a thousand years, forever young, was this woman.

She was as fair as this morning and fresh as tomorrow's flowers and lovely as any maid when a man shuts up his eyes and traps her, in cameo perfection, on the shell of his eyelids. The lightningrod salesman remembered to breathe.

Once, long ago, travelling among the marbles of Rome and Florence, he had seen women like this, kept in stone instead of Ice. Once, wandering in the Louvre, he had found women like this, washed in summer colour and kept in paint. Once, as a boy, sneaking the cool grottoes behind a motion picture theatre screen, on his way to a free seat, he had glanced up and there towering and flooding the haunted dark seen a women's face as he had never seen it since, of such size and beauty built of milkbone and moonflesh, at to freeze him there alone behind the stage, shadowed by the, motion of her lips, the birdwing flicker of her eyes, the snowpaledeathshimmering illumination from her cheeks.

So from other years there jumped forth images which flowed and found new substance here within the ice.

What colour was her hair? It was blonde to whiteness and might take any colour, once set free of cold.

How tall was she?

The prism of the ice might well multiply her size or diminish her as you moved this way or that before the empty store, the window, the nightsoft raptapping everfingering, gently probing moths.

Not important.

For above all - the lightningrod salesman shivered - he knew the most extraordinary thing.

If by some miracle her eyelids should open within that sapphire and she should look at him, he knew what colour her eyes would be.

He knew what colour her eyes would be.

If one were to enter this lonely night shop -

If one were to put forth one's hand, the warmth of that hand would. . .what?

Melt the ice.

The lightningrod salesman stood there for a long moment, his eyes quickened shut.

He let his breath out.

It was warm as summer on his teeth.

His hand touched the shop door. It swung open. Cold arctic air blew out round him. He stepped in.

The door shut.

The white snowflake moths tapped at the window.

11

Midnight then and the town clocks chiming on toward one and two and then three in the deep morning and the peals of the great clocks shaking dust off old toys in attics and shedding silver off old mirrors in yet higher attics and s up dreams about docks in all beds where children slept.

Will heard it.

Muffled away in the prairie lands, the chuffing of an engine, the slowslowfollowing dragonglide of a train.

Will sat up in bed.

Across the way, like a mirror image, Jim sat up, too.

A calliope began to play oh so softly, grieving to itself, a million miles away.

In one single motion, Will leaned from his window, as did Jim. Without a word they gazed over the trembling surf of trees.

Their rooms were high, as boys' rooms should be. From these gaunt windows they could riflefire their gaze artillery distances past library, city hall, depot, cow barns, farmlands to empty prairie!

There, on the world's rim, the lovely snailgleam of the railway tracks ran, flinging wild gesticulations of lemon or cherrycoloured semaphore to the stars.

There, on the precipice of earth, a small steam feather uprose like the first of a storm cloud yet to come.

The train itself appeared, link by link, engine, coalcar, and numerous and numbered allasleepandslumberingdream filled cars that followed the fireflysparked chum, chant, drowsy autumn hearthfire roar. Hellfires flushed the stunned hills. Even at this remote view, one imagined men with buffalohaunched arms shovelling black meteor falls of coal into the open boilers of the engine.

The engine!

Both boys vanished, came back to life binoculars.

'The engine!'

'Civil War! No other stack like that since 1900!'

'The rest of the train, all of it's old'

'The flags! The cages! It's the carnival!'

They listened. At first Will thought he heard the air whistling fast in his nostrils. But no - it was the train, and the calliope sighing, weeping, on that train.

'Sounds like church music!'

'Hell. Why would a carnival play church music?'

'Don't say hell,' hissed Will.

'Hell.' Jim ferociously leaned out. 'I've saved up all day. Everyone's asleep so - hell!'

The music drifted by their windows. Goose pimples rose bid as boils on Will's arms.

'That is church music. Changed.'

'For criyi, I'm froze, let's go watch them set up!'

'At three a.m.?'

'At three a.m.!'

Jim vanished.

For a moment, Will watched Jim dance around over there, shirt uplifted, pants going on, while off in night country, panting, churning was this funeral train, all blackplumed cars, licoricecoloured cages, and a sooty calliope clamouring, banging three different hymns mixed and lost, maybe not there at all.

'Here goes nothing!'

Jim slid down the drainpipe on his house, toward the sleeping lawns.

'Jim! Wait!'

Will thrashed into his clothes.

'Jim, don't go alone!'

And followed after.

Sometimes you see a kite so high, so wise it almost knows the wind. It travels, then chooses to land in one spot and no other and no matter how you yank, run this way or that, it will simply break its cord, seek its resting place and bring you, bloodmouthed, running.

'Jim! Wait for me!'

So now Jim was the kite, the wild twine cut, and whatever wisdom was his taking him away from Will who could only run, earthbound, after one so high and dark silent and suddenly strange.

'Jim, here I come!'

And running, Will thought, Boy, it's the same old thing. I talk. Jim runs. I tilt stones, Jim grabs the cold junk under the stones and - licketysplit! I climb hills. Jim yells off church steeples. I got a bank account. Jim's got the hair on his head, the yell in his mouth, the shirt on his back and the tennis shoes on his feet. How come I think he's richer? Because, Will thought, I sit on a rock in the sun and old Jim, he prickles his armhairs by moonlight and dances with hoptoads. I tend cows, Jim tames Gila monsters. Fool! I yell at Jim. Coward! he yells back. And here we - go!

And they ran from town, across fields and both froze under a rail bridge with the moon ready beyond the hills and the meadows trembling with a fur of dew.

WHAM!

The carnival train thundered the bridge, The calliope wailed.

'There's no one playing it!' Jim stared up.

'Jim, no jokes!'

'Mother's honour, look!'

Going away, away, the calliope pipes shimmered with star explosions, but no one sat at the high keyboard. The wind, sluicing airwater air in the pipes, made the music.

The boys ran. The train curved away, gonging it's undersea funeral bell, sunk, rusted, greenmossed, tolling, tolling. Then the engine whistle blew a great steam whiff and Will broke out in pearls of ice.

Way late at night Will had heard - how often? - train whistles jetting steam along the rim of sleep, forlorn, alone and far, no matter how near they came. Sometimes he woke to find tears on his cheek, asked why, lay back, listened and thought, Yes! they make me cry, going east, going west, the

trains so far gone in country deeps they drown in tides of sleep that escape the towns.

Those trains and their grieving sounds were lost forever between stations, not remembering, where they had been, not guessing where they might go, exhaling their last pale breaths over the horizon, gone. So it was with all trains, ever.

Yet this train's whistle!

The wails of a lifetime were gathered in it from other nights in other slumbering years; the howl of moondreamed dogs, the seep of rivercold winds through January porch screens which stopped the blood, a thousand fire sirens weeping, or worse! the outgone shreds of breath, the protests of a billion people dead or dying, not wanting to be dead, their groans, their sighs, burst over the earth!

Tears jumped to Will's eyes. He lurched. He knelt. He pretended to lace one shoe.

But then he saw Jim's hands clap his ears, his eyes wet, too. The whistle screamed. Jim screamed against the scream. The whistle shrieked. Will shrieked against the shriek.

Then the billion voices ceased, instantly, as if the train had plunged in a fire storm off the earth.

The train skimmed on softly, slithering, black pennants fluttering, black confetti lost on its own sicksweet candy wind, down the hill, with the boys pursuing., the air so cold they ate ice cream with each breath.

They climbed a last rise to look down.

'Boy,' whispered Jim.

The train had pulled off into Rolfe's moon meadow, socalled because town couples came out to see the moon rise here over a land so wide, so long, it was like an inland sea, filled with grass in spring., or hay in late, summer or snow in winter, it was fine walking here along its crisp shore with the moon coming up to tremble in its tides.

Well, the carnival train was crouched there now in the autumn grass on the old spur near the Woods and the boys crept and lay down under a bush, waiting.

'It's so quiet, whispered Will.

The train just stood in the middle of the dry autumn field, no one in the locomotive no one in the tender, no one in any of the cars behind, all black under the moon, and just the small sounds of its metal cooling, ticking on the rails.

"Ssst,' said Jim. 'I feel them moving in there.'

Will felt the catfuzz on his body bramble up by the thousands.

'You think they mind us watching?'

'Maybe,' said Jim, happily.

'Then why the noisy calliope?'

"When I figure that,' Jim said, 'I'll tell you. Look!'

Whisper.

As if exhaling itself straight down from the sky, a vast mossgreen balloon touched at the moon.

It hovered two hundred yards above and away, quietly riding the wind.

'The basket under the balloon, someone in it!'

But then a tall man stepped down from the train caboose platform like a captain assaying the tidal weathers of this inland sea. All dark suit, shadowfaced, he waded to the centre of the meadow, his shirt as black as the gloved hands he now stretched to the sky.

He gestured, once.

And the train came to life.

At first a head lifted in one window, then an arm, then another head like a puppet in a marionette theatre. Suddenly two men in black were carrying a dark tentpole out across the hissing grass.

It was the silence that made Will pull back, even as Jim leaned forward eyes moonbright.

A carnival should be all growls, roars like, timberlands stacked, bundled, rolled and crashed, great explosions of lion dust, men ablaze with working anger, pop bottles jangling, horse buckles shivering, engines and elephants in full stampede through rains of sweat while zebras neighed and trembled like cage trapped in cage.

But this was like old movies, the silent theatre haunted with blackandwhite ghosts, silvery mouth opening to let moonlight smoke out, gestures made in silence so hushed you could hear the wind fizz the hair on your cheeks. More shadows rustled from the train, passing the animal cages where darkness prowled with unlit eyes and the calliope stood mute save for the faintest idiot tune the breeze piped wandering up the flues.

The ringmaster stood in the middle of the land. The balloon like a vast mouldy green cheese stood fixed to the sky. Then darkness came.

The last thing Will saw was the balloon swooping down, as clouds covered the moon.

In the night he felt the men rush to unseen tasks. He sensed the balloon, like a great fat spider, fiddling with the

lines and poles, rearing a tapestry in the sky.

The clouds arose. The balloon sifted up.

In the meadow stood the skeleton main poles and wires of the main tent, waiting for its canvas skin.

More clouds poured over the white moon. Shadowed, Will shivered. He heard Jim crawling forward, seized his ankle, felt him stiffen.

'Wait! ' said Will. 'They're bringing out the canvas l'

'No,' said Jim. 'Oh, no. . .'

For somehow instead, they both knew, the wires highflung on the poles were catching swift clouds, ripping them free from the wind in streamers which, stitched and sewn by some great monster shadow, made canvas and more canvas as the tent took shape. At last there was the clearwater sound of vast flags blowing.

The motion stopped. The darkness within darkness was still.

Will lay, eyes shut, hearing the beat of great oilblack wings as if a huge, ancient bird had drummed down to live, to breathe, to survive in the night meadow.

The clouds blew away.

The balloon was gone.

The men were gone.

The tents rippled like black rain on their poles.

Suddenly it seemed a long way to town.

Instinctively, Will glanced behind himself.

Nothing but grass and whispers.

Slowly he looked back at the silent, dark seemingly empty tents.

'I don't like it he said.

Jim could not tear his eyes away.

'Yeah,' he whispered. 'Yeah.'

Will stood up. Jim lay on the earth.

"Jim!' said Will.

Jim jerked his head as if slapped. He was on his knees, he swayed up. His body turned, but his eyes were fastened to those black flags, the great sideshow signs swarming with unguessed wings, horns, and demon smiles.

A bird screamed.

Jim jumped. Jim gasped.

Cloud shadows panicked them over the hills to the edge of town.

From there, the two boys ran alone.

The air was cold blowing in through the wideopen library window.

Charles Halloway had stood there for a long time.

Now, he quickened.

Along the street below fled two shadows, two boys above them matching shadow stride for stride. They softly printed the night air with treads.

'Jim!' cried the old man. 'Will!'

But not aloud.

The boys went away towards home.

Charles Halloway looked out into the country.

Wandering alone in the library, letting his broom tell him things no one else could hear, he had heard the whistle and the disjointedcalliope hymns.

'Three,' he now said, halfaloud. 'Three in the morning. . .'

In the meadow the tents, the carnival waited. Waited for someone, anyone to wade along the grassy surf. The great tents filled like bellows. They softly issued forth exhalations of air that smelled like ancient yellow beasts.

But only the moon looked in at the hollow dark, the deep caverns. Outside, night beasts hung in midgallop on a carousel. Beyond lay fathoms of Mirror Maze which housed a multifold series of empty vanities one wave on another, still, serene, silvered with age, white with time. Any shadow, at the entrance, might stir reverberations the colour of fright, unravel deepburied moons.

If a man stood here would he see himself unfolded away a billion times to eternity? Would a billion images look back, each face and the face after and the face after that old, older, oldest? Would he find himself lost in a fine dust away off deep down there, not fifty but sixty, not sixty but seventy, not seventy but eighty, ninety, ninetynine years old?

The maze did not ask.

The maze did not tell.

It simply stood and waited like a great arctic floe.

'Three o'clock. . .'

Charles Halloway was cold. His skin was suddenly a lizard's skin. His stomach filled with blood turned to rust. His mouth tasted of night damps.

Yet he could not turn from the library window.

Far off, something glittered in the meadow.

It was moonlight, flashing on a great glass.

Perhaps the light said something, perhaps it spoke in code.

I'll go there, thought Charles Halloway, I won't go there.

I like it, he thought, I don't like it.

A moment later the library door slammed.

Going home, he passed the empty store window.

Inside stood two abandoned sawhorses.

Between lay a pool of water. In the water floated a few shards of ice. In the ice were a few long strands of hair.

Charles Halloway saw but chose not to see. He turned and was gone. The street was soon as empty as the hardwarestore window.

Far away, in the meadow, shadows flickered in the Mirror Maze, as if parts of someone's life, yet unborn, were trapped there, waiting to be lived.

So the maze waited, its cold gaze ready, for so much as a bird to come look, see, and fly away shrieking.

But no bird came.

14

'Three,' a voice said.

Will listened, cold but warming, glad to be in with a roof above, floor below, wall and door between too much exposure, too much freedom, too much night.

'Three. . .'

Dad's voice, home now, moving down the hall, speaking to itself.

'Three. . .'

Why, thought Will, that's when the train came. Had Dad seen, heard, followed?

No, he mustn't! Will hunched himself. Why not? He trembled. What did he fear?

The carnival rushing in like a black stampede of storm waves on the shore out beyond? Of him and Jim and Dad knowing, of the town asleep, not knowing, was that it?

Yes. Will buried himself, deep. Yes. . .

'Three. . .'

Three in the morning, thought Charles Halloway, seated on the edge of his bed. Why did the train come at that hour?

For, he thought, it's a special hour. Women never wake then, do they? They sleep the sleep of babes and children. But men in middle age? They know that hour well. Oh God, midnight's not bad, you wake and go back to sleep, one or two's not bad, you toss but sleep again. Five or six in the morning's not bad there's hope, for dawn's just under the horizon. But three, now, Christ, three a.m.! The blood moves slow. You're the nearest to dead you'll ever be save dying. Sleep is a patch of death, but three in the morn, full wideeyed staring, is living death! You dream with your eyes open. God, if you had strength to rouse up, you'd slaughter your half dreams with buckshot! But no, you lie pinned to a deep wellbottom that's burned dry. The moon rolls by to look at you down there, with its idiot face. It's a long way back to sunset, a far way on to dawn, so you summon all the fool things of your life, the stupid lovely things done with people known so very well who are now so very dead - And wasn't it true, had he read it somewhere, more people in hospitals die at 3 a.m. than at any other time. . .?

Stop! he cried silently.

'Charlie?' his wife said in her sleep.

Slowly, he took off the other shoe.

His wife smiled in her sleep.

Why?

She's immortal. She has a son.

Your son, too!

But what father ever really believes it? He carries no burden, he feels no pain. What man, like woman, lies down in darkness and gets up with child? The gentle, smiling ones own the good secret. Oh, what strange wonderful clocks women are. They nest in Time. They make the flesh that holds fast and binds eternity. They live inside the gift, know power, accept, and need not mention it. Why speak of Time when you are Time, and shape the universal moments, as they pass, into warmth and action? How men envy and often hate these warm clocks, these wives, who know they will live forever. So what do we do? We men turn terribly mean, because we can't hold to the world ourselves or anything. We are blind to continuity, all breaks down, falls, melts, stops, rots, or runs away. So, since we cannot shape Time, where does that leave men? Sleepless. Staring.

Three a.m. That's our reward. Three in the morn. The soul's midnight. The tide goes out, the soul ebbs. And a train arrives at an hour of despair. Why?

'Charlie. . .?'

His wife's hand moved to his.

'You. . .all right. . .Charlie?'

She drowsed.

He did not answer.

He could not tell her how he was.

15

The sun rose yellow as a lemon.

The sky was round and blue.

The birds looped clear water songs in the air.

Will and Jim leaned from their windows.

Nothing had changed.

Except the look in Jim's eyes.

'Last night. . .' said Will. 'Did or didn't it happen?'

They both gazed toward the far meadows.

The air was sweet as syrup. They could find no shadows, anywhere, even under trees.

'Six minutes!' cried Jim.

'Five!'

Four minutes later, cornflakes lurching in their stomachs, they frisked the leaves to a fine red dust going out of town.

With a wild flutter of breath, they raised their eyes from the earth they had been treading.

And the carnival was there.

'Hey. . .'

For the tents were lemon like the sun, brass like wheat fields a few weeks ago. Flags and banners bright as bluebirds snapped above lioncoloured canvas. From booths painted cottoncandy colours fine Saturday smells of bacon and eggs, hot dogs and pancakes swam with the wind. Everywhere ran boys. Everywhere, sleepy fathers followed.

'It's just a plain old carnival,' said Will.

'Like heck,' said Jim. 'We weren't blind last night. Cone on!'

They marched one hundred yards straight on and deep into the midway. And the deeper they went, the more obvious it became they would find no night men cattreading shadow while strange tents plumed like thunder clouds. Instead, close up, the carnival was mildewed rope, motheaten canvas, rainworn, sunbleached tinsel. The sideshow paintings, hung like sad albatrosses on their poles, flapped

and let fall flakes of ancient paint, shivering and at the same time revealing the unwondrous wonders of a thin man, fatman, needlehead, tattooed man, hula dancer. . . .

They prowled on but found no mysterious midnight sphere of evil gas tied by Mysterious Oriental knots to daggers plunged in dark earth, no maniac ticket takers bent on terrible revenges. The calliope by the ticket booth neither screamed deaths nor hummed idiot songs to itself. The train? Pulled off on a spur in the warming grass, it was old, yes, and welded tight with rust, but it looked like a titanic magnet that had collected to itself, from locomotive boneyards across three continents, drive shafts, flywheels, smoke stacks, and handmedown secondrate nightmares. It did not cut a black and mortuary silhouette. It asked permission but to lie dead in autumn strewings, so much tired steam and iron gunpowder blowing away.

'Jim! Will!'

Here came Miss Foley, their seventhgrade schoolteacher, along the midway, all smiles.

'Boys,' she said, 'what's wrong? You look as if you lost something.'

'Well,' said Will, 'last night, did you hear that calliope - '

'Calliope? No - '

'Then why're you out here so early, Miss Foley?' asked Jim.

'I love carnivals.' said Miss Foley, a little woman lost somewhere in her grey fifties, beaming around. 'I'll buy hot dogs and you eat while I look for my fool nephew. You seen him?'

'Nephew?'

'Robert. Staying with me a fewweeks. Father's dead, mother's sick in Wisconsin. I took him in. He ran out here early today. Said he'd meet me. But you know boys! My, you look glum.' She shoved food at them. 'Eat! Cheer up! Rides'll open in ten minutes. Meantime, I think I'll spy through that Mirror Maze and - '

'No,' said Will.

'No what?' asked Miss Foley.

'No Mirror Maze.' Will swallowed. He stared at fathoms of reflections. You could never strike bottom there. It was like winter standing tall, waiting to kill you with a glance. 'Miss Foley,' he said at last, and wondered to hear his mouth say it, 'don't go in there.'

'Why not?'

Jim peered, fascinated, into Will's face. 'Yeah, tell us. Why not?'

'People get lost,' said Will, lamely.

'All the more reason. Robert might be wandering, loose, and not find his way out if I don't grab his ear - '

'Never can tell - ' Will could not take his eyes off the millions of miles of blind grass - 'what might be s around in there. . . .'

'Swimming!' Miss Foley laughed. 'What a lovely mind you have, Willy. Well, yes, but I'm an old fish. So. . .'

'Miss Foley!'

Miss Foley waved, poised, took a step, and vanished into the mirror ocean. They watched as she settled, wandered, sank deep, deep, and was finally dissolved, grey among silver.

Jim grabbed Will. 'What was all that?'

'Gosh, Jim, it's the mirrors! They're the only things I don't like. I mean, they're the only things like last night.'

'Boy, boy, you been out in the sun,' snorted Jim. 'That maze there is. . . .' His voice trailed off. He sniffed the cold air blowing out as from an, ice house between the tall reflections.

'Jim? You were saying?

But Jim said nothing. After a long time he clapped his hand to the back of his neck. 'It really does!' he cried in soft amaze.

'What does?'

'Hair! I read it all my life. In scary stories, it stands on end! Mine's doing it - now!'

'Gosh, Jim. So's mine!'

They stood entranced with the delicious cold bumps on their necks and the suddenly stiffened small hairs quilled up over their scalps.

There was a flourish of light and shadow.

Bumping through the Mirror Maze they saw two, four, a dozen Miss Foleys.

They didn't know which one was real, so they waved to all of them.

But none of the Miss Foleys saw or waved back. Blind she walked. Blind, she tacked her nails to cold glass.

'Miss Foley!'

Her eyes, flexed wide as from blasts of photographic powder, were skinned white like a statue's. Deep under the

glass, she spoke. She murmured. She whimpered. Now she cried. Now she shouted. Now she yelled. She knocked glass with her head, her elbows, tilted drunken as a lightblind moth, raised her hands in claws. 'Oh God! Help!' she wailed. 'Help, oh God!'

Jim and Will saw their own faces, pale, their own eyes, wide, in the mirrors as they plunged.

'Miss Foley, here!' Jim cracked his brow.

'This way!' But Will found only cold glass.

A hand flew from empty space. An old woman's hand, sinking for the last time. It seized anything to save itself. The anything was Will. She pulled him under.

'Will!'

'Jim! Jim!'

And Jim held him and he held her and pulled her free of the silently rushing mirrors coming in from the desolate seas.

They stepped into sunlight.

Miss Foley, one hand to her bruised cheek, bleated, muttered, then laughed quickly, then gasped, and wiped her eyes.

'Thank you, Will, Jim, oh thank you. I'd of drowned! I mean. . .oh, Will you were right! My God, did you see her, she's lost, drowned in there, poor girl!. oh the poor lost sweet. . .save her, oh, we must save her!'

'Miss Foley, boy, you're hurting.' Will firmly removed her fists from clenching the flesh of his arm. 'There's no one in there.'

'I saw her! Please! Look! Save her!'

Will jumped to the maze entrance and stopped. The ticket taker gave him an idle glance of contempt. Will backed away to Miss Foley.

'I swear, no one went in ahead or after you, ma'am. It's my fault, I joked about the water, you must've got mixed up, lost, and scared. . . .'

But if she heard, she went on biting the back of her hand, her voice the voice of someone come out of the sea after no air, a long dread time deep, no hope of life and now set free.

'Gone? She's at the bottom! Poor girl. I knew her. “I know you!” I said when I first saw her a minute ago. I waved, she waved. “Hello!” I ran! - bang! I fell. She fell. A dozen, a thousand of her fell. “Wait!” I said. Oh, she looked so fine, so lovely, so young. But it scared me. “What're you doing here?”

I said. “Why,” I think she said, “I'm real. You're not!” she laughed, way under water. She ran off in the maze. We must find her! Before - '

Miss Foley, Will's arm around her, took a last trembling breath and grew strangely quiet.

Jim was staring deep into those cold mirrors, looking for sharks that could not be seen.

'Miss Foley,' he said, 'what did she look like?'

Miss Foley's voice was pale but calm.

'The fact is. . .she looked like myself, many, many years ago.

'I'll go home now.' she said.

'Miss Foley, we'll - '

'No. Stay. I'm just fine. Have fun, boys. Enjoy.'

And she walked slowly away, alone, down the midway.

Somewhere a vast animal made water. Ammonia made the wind turn ancient as it passed.

'I'm leaving!' said Will.

'Will,' said Jim. 'We're staying until sundown, boy, dark sundown, and figure it all. You chicken?'

'No,' murmured Will. 'But. . .anybody want to dive back in that maze?'

Jim gazed fiercely deep into the bottomless sea, where now only the pure light glanced back at itself, help up emptiness upon emptiness beyond emptiness before their eyes.

'Nobody.' Jim let his heart beat twice. '. . .I guess.'

16

A bad thing happened at sunset.

Jim vanished.

Through noon and after noon, they had screamed up half the rides, knocked over dirty milkbottles, smashed kewpiedoll winning plates, smelling, listening, looking their way through the autumn crowd trampling the leafy sawdust.

And then quite suddenly Jim was gone.

And Will, not asking anyone but himself, absolutely silent certainsure, walked steadily through the late crowd as the sky was turning plum coloured until he came to the maze and paid his dime and stepped up inside and called softly just one time:

'. . .Jim. . .'

And Jim was there, half in, half out of the cold glass

tides like someone abandoned on a seashore when a dose friend has gone far out, and there is wonder if he will ever come back. Jim stood as if he had not moved so much as an eyelash in five minutes, staring, his mouth halfopen, waiting for the next wave to come in and show him more.

'Jim! Get outa there!'

'Will. . .' Jim sighed faintly. 'Let me be.'

'Like heck!' With one leap, Will grabbed Jim's belt and hauled. Shuffling backward, Jim did not seem to know he was being dragged from the maze, for he kept protesting in awe at some unseen wonder: 'Oh, Will, oh, Willy, Will, oh, Willy. . .'

'Jim, you nut. I'm taking you home!'

'What? What? What?'

They were in cold air. The sky was darker than plums now, with a few clouds burning late sunfire above. The sunfire flamed on Jim's feverish cheeks, his open lips, his wide and terribly rich green shining eyes.

'Jim, what'd you see in there? The same as Miss Foley?'

'What, what?

'I'm gonna, bust your nose! Come on!' He hustled, pulled, shoved, half carried this fever, this elation, unstruggling friend.

'Can't tell you, Will, wouldn't believe, can't tell you,in there, oh, in there, in there. . .'

'Shut up!' Will socked his arm. 'Scare heck outa me, just like she scared us. Bugs! It's almost suppertime. Folks'll think we're dead and buried!'

They were striding now, slashing the autumn grass with their shoes, beyond the tents in the haysmelling, leafmould fields, Will glaring at town, Jim staring back at the high nowdarkening banners as the last of the sun hid under the earth.

'Will, we got to come back. Tonight - '

'Okay, come back alone.'

Jim stopped.

'You wouldn't let me come alone. You're always going to be around, aren't you, Will? To protect me?'

'Look who needs protection.' Will laughed and then did not laugh again, for Jim was looking at him, the last wild light dying in his mouth, and caught in the thin hollows of his nostrils and in his suddenly deepset eyes.

'You'll always be with me, huh, Will?'

Jim simply breathed warm upon him and his blood

stirred with the old, the familiar answers: yes, yes, you know it, yes, yes.

And turning together, they stumbled over a clanking dark mound of leather bag.

17

They stood for a long moment over the huge leather bag.

Almost secretively, Will kicked it. It made the sound of iron indigestion.

'Why,' said Will, 'that belongs to the lightningrod salesman!'

Jim slipped his hand through the leather mouth and hefted forth a metal shaft clustered with chimeras, Chinese dragons all fang, eyeball and mossgreen armour, all cross and crescent; every symbol around the world that made men safe, or seemed to, clung there, greaving the boys' hands with odd weight and meaning.

'Storm never came. But he went.'

'Where? And why did he leave his bag?'

They both looked to the carnival where dusk coloured the canvas billows. Shadows ran coolly out to engulf them. People in cars honked home in tired commotions. Boys on skeleton bikes whistled dogs after. Soon night would own the midway while shadows rode the ferris wheel up to cloud the stars.

'People,' said Jim, 'don't leave their whole life lying around. This is everything that old man owned. Something important - ' Jim breathed soft fire - 'made him forget. So he just walked off and left this here.'

'What? What's so important you forget everything?'

'Why - ' Jim examined his friend, curiously, twilight in his face - 'no one can tell you. You find it yourself. Mysteries and mysteries. Storm salesman. Storm salesman's bag. If we don't look now, we might never know.'

'Jim, in ten minutes - '

'Sure! Midway'll be dark. Everyone home for dinner. Just us alone. But won't it feel great? Just us! And here we go, back in!'

Passing the Mirror Maze, they saw two armies - a billion Jims, a billion Wills - collide, melt, vanish. And like those armies, so vanished the real army of people.

They boys stood alone among the encampments of dusk thinking of all the boys in town sitting down to warm food in

bright rooms.

18

The redlettered sign said: OUT OF ORDER! KEEP OFF!

'Sign's been up all day. I don't believe signs,' said Jim.

They peered in at the, merrygoround which lay under a dry rattle and roar of windtumbled oak trees. Its horses, goats, antelopes, zebras, speared through their spines with brass javelins, hung contorted as in a death rictus, asking mercy with their frightcoloured eyes, seeking revenge with their paniccoloured teeth.

'Don't look broke to me.'

Jim ambled across the clanking chain, leaped to a turntable surface vast as the moon, among the frantic but forever spelled beasts.

'Jim!'

'Will, this is the only ride we haven't looked at. So. . .'

Jim swayed. The lunatic carousel world stirred atilt with his lean bulk. He strolled through brass forests amidst animal rousts. He swung astride a plumdusk stallion.

'Ho, boy, git!'

A man rose from machinery darkness.

'Jim!'

Reaching out from the shadows among the calliope tubes and moonskinned drums the man hoisted Jim yelling out on the air.

'Help, Will, help!'

Will leaped through the animals.

The man smiled easily, welcomed him handily, swung him high beside Jim. They stared down at bright flamered hair, bright flameblue eyes, and rippling biceps.

'Out of order,' said the man. 'Can't you read?'

'Put them down.' said a gentle voice.

Hung high, Jim and Will glanced over at a second man standing tall beyond the chains.

'Down,' he said again.

And they were carried through the brass forest of wild but uncomplaining brutes and set in the dust.

'We were - ' said Will

'Curious?' This second man was tall as a lamp post. His pale face, lunar pockmarks denting it, cast light on those who stood below. His vest was the colour of fresh blood. His eyesbrows, his hair, his suit were licorice black, and the

sunyellow gem which stared from the tiepin thrust in his cravat was the same unblinking shade and bright crystal as his eyes. But in this instant, swiftly, and with utter clearness, it was the suit which fascinated Will. For it seemed woven of boarbramble, clockspring hair, bristle, and a sort of evertrembling, everglistening dark hemp. The suit caught light and stirred like a bed of black tweedthorns, interminably itching, covering the man's long body with motion so it seemed he should excruciate, cry out, and tear the clothes free. Yet here he stood, mooncalm, inhabiting his itchweed suit and watching Jim's mouth with his yellow eyes. He never looked once at Will.

'The name is Dark.'

He flourished a white calling card. It turned blue.

Whisper. Red.

Whisk. A green man dangled from a tree stamped on the card.

Flit. Shh.

'Dark. And my friend with the red hair there is Mr Cooger. Of Cooger and Dark's. . .'

Flipflickshhh.

Names appeared, disappeared on the white square:

'. . .Combined Shadow Shows. . .'

Tickwash.

A mushroomwitch stirred mouldering herb pots.

'. . .and crosscontinental Pandemonium Theatre Company. . .'

He handed the card to Jim. It now read:

Our speciality: to examine, oil,
polish, and repair Death Watch
Beetles.

Calmly, Jim read it. Calmly, Jim put a fist into his copious and richly treasured pockets, rummaged, and held out his hand.

On his palm lay a dead brown insect.

'Here,' Jim said. 'Fix this.'

Mr Dark exploded his laugh. 'Superb! I will!' He extended his hand. His shirt sleeve pulled up.

Bright purple, black green and lightningblue eels, worms, and Latin scrolls slid to view on his wrist.

'Boy!' cried Will. 'You must be the Tattooed Man!'

'No.' Jim studied the stranger. 'The Illustrated Man.

There's a difference.'

Mr Dark nodded, pleased. 'What's your name, boy?'

Don't tell him! thought Will, and stopped. Why not? he wondered, why?

Jim's lips hardly twitched.

'Simon,' he said.

He smiled to show it was a lie.

Mr Dark smiled to show he knew it.

'Want to see more, “Simon”?'

Jim would not give him the satisfaction of a nod.

Slowly, with great mouthworking pleasure, Mr Dark pushed his sleeve high to his elbow.

Jim.stared. The arm was like a cobra weaving, bobbing, swaying, to strike. Mr Dark clenched his fist, wriggled his fingers. The muscles danced.

Will wanted to run around and see, but could only watch, thinking Jim, oh, Jim!

For there stood Jim and there was this tall man, each examining the other as if he were a reflection in a shop window late at night. The tall man's brambled suit, shadowed out now to colour Jim's cheeks and storm over his wide and drinking eyes with a look of rain instead of the sharp catgreen they always were. Jim stood like a runner who has come a long way, fever in his mouth, hands open to receive any gift. And right now it was a gift of pictures twitched in pantomime, as Mr Dark made his illustrious jerk coldskinned over his warmpulsed wrist as the stars came out above and, Jim stared and Will could not see and a long way off the last of the town people went away toward town in their warm cars, and Jim said, faintly, 'Gosh. . .' and Mr Dark rolled down his sleeve.

'Show's over. Suppertime. Carnival's shut up until seven. Everyone out. Come back, “Simon,” and ride the merrygoround, when it's fixed. Take this card. Free ride.'

Jim stared at the hidden wrist and put the card in his pocket.

'So long!'

Jim ran. Will ran.

Jim whirled, glanced back, leaped, and for the second time in the hour, vanished.

Will looked up into the tree where Jim squirmed on a limb, hidden.

Mr Dark and Mr Cooger were turned away, busy with the merrygoround.

'Quick, Will!'

'Jim. . .?'

'They'll see you. Jump!'

Will jumped. Jim hauled him up. The great tree shook. A wind roared by in the sky. Jim helped him cling, gasping, among the branches.

'Jim, we don't belong here!'

'Shut up! Look!' whispered Jim.

Somewhere in the carousel machinery there were taps and brass knockings, a faint squeal and whistle of calliope steam.

'What was on his arm, Jim?'

'A picture.'

'Yeah, but what kind?'

'It was - Jim shut his eyes. 'It was - a picture of a. . .snake. . .that's it. . .snake.' But when he opened his eyes, he would not look at Will.

'Okay, if you don't want to tell me.'

'I told you, Will, a snake. I'll get him to show it to you, later, you want that?'

No, thought Will, I don't want that.

He looked down at the billion footprints left in the sawdust on the empty midway and suddenly it was a lot closer to midnight than to noon.

'I'm going home. . .'

'Sure, Will,' go on. Mirror mazes, old teacherladies, lost lightningrod bags, lightningrod salesmen disappear, snake pictures dancing, unbroken merrygorounds, and you want to go home!? Sure, old friend, Will, so long.'

'I. . .' Will started dwon the tree, and froze.

'All clear?' cried a voice below.

'Clear!' someone shouted at the far end of the midway.

Mr Dark moved, not fifty feet away to a red control box near the merrygoround ticket booth. He glared in all directions. He glared into the tree.

Will hugged, Jim hugged the limb, tightened into smallness.

'Start up!'

With a pop, a bang, a jangle of reins, a lift and downfall, a rise and descent of brass, the carousel moved.

But, thought Will, it's broke, out of order!

He flicked a glance at Jim, who pointed wildly down.

The merrygoround was running, yes, but. . .

It was running backward.

The small calliope inside the carousel machinery rattlesnapped its nervousstallion shivering drums, clashed its harvestmoon cymbals, toothed its castanets, and throatily choked and sobbed its reeds, whistles, and baroque flutes.

The music, Will thought, it's backward, too!

Mr Dark jerked about, glanced up, as if he had heard Will's thoughts. A wind shook the trees in black tumults. Mr Dark shrugged and looked away.

The carousel wheeled faster, shrieking, plunging, going roundaboutback!

Now Mr Cooger, with his flaming red hair and fireblue eyes, was pacing the midway, making a last check. He stood under their tree. Will could have let spit down on him. Then the calliope gave a particularly violent cry of foul murder which made dogs howl in far counties, and Mr Cooger, spinning, ran and leaped on the backwhirling universe of animals who, tail first, head last, pursued an endless circling night toward unfound and never to be discovered destinations. Handslapping brass poles, he flung himself into a seat where with his bristly red hair, pink face, and incredible sharp blue eyes he sat silent, going back around, back around, the music squealing swift back with him like insucked breath.

The music, thought Will, what is it? And how do I know it's backside first? He, hugged the limb, tried to catch the tune, then hum it forward in his head. But the brass bells, the drums, hammered his chest, revved his heart so he felt his pulse reverse, his blood turn back in perverse thrusts through all his flesh, so he was nearly shaken free to fall, so all he did was clutch, hang pale, and drink the sight of the backwardturning machine and Mr Dark, alert at the controls, on the sidelines.

It was Jim who first noticed the new thing happening, for he kicked Will, once, Will looked over, and Jim nodded frantically at the man in the machine as he came around the next time.

Mr Cooger's face was melting like pink wax.

His hands were becoming doll's hands.

His bones sank away beneath his clothes; his clothes then shrank down to fit his dwindling frame.

His face flickered going, and each time around he melted more.

Will saw Jim's head shift, circling.

The carousel wheeled, a great backdrifting lunar dream

the horses thrusting, the music ingasped after, while Mr Cooger, as simple as shadows, as simple as light, as simple as time, got younger. And younger. And younger.

Each time he wheeled to view he sat alone with his bones, which shaped like warm candles burning away to tender years.

He gazed serenely at the fiery constellations, the childreninhabited trees, which went away from him as he removed himself from them and his nose Finished and his sweet wax ears reshaped themselves to small pink roses.

Now no longer forty where he had begun his backspiraled journey, Mr Cooger was nineteen.

Around went the reverse parade of horse, pole, music, man become young man, young man fast rendered down to boy. . . .

Mr Cooger was seventeen, sixteen. . . .

Another and another time around under the sky and trees and Will whispering, Jim counting the times around, around, while the night air warmed to summer heat by friction of sunmetal brass, the passionate backturned flight of beasts, wore the wax doll down and down and washed him clean with the still stranger musics until all ceased, all died away to stillness the calliope shut up its brassworks, the ironmongery machines hissed off, and with a last faint whine like desert sands blown backup Arabian hourglasses, the carousel rocked on seaweed waters and stood still.

The figure seated in the carved white wooden sleigh chair was very small.

Mr Cooger was twelve years old.

No. Will's mouth shaped the word. No. Jim's did the same.

The small shape, stepped down from the silent world, its face in shadow, but its hands newborn wrinkled pink, held out in raw carnival lamplight.

The strange manboy shot his gaze up, down, smelling fright somewhere, terror and awe in the vicinity. Will balled himself tight and shut his eyes. He felt the terrible gaze shoot through the leaves like brown needledarts, pass on. Then, rabbitrunning, the small shape lit off down the empty midway.

Jim was first to stir the leaves aside.

Mr Dark was gone, too, in the evening hush.

It seemed to take Jim forever to fall down to earth. Will fell after and they both stood, clamorous with alarms,

shaken by concussions of silent pantomime, blasted by events all the more numbing because they ran off into the night unknown. And it was Jim who spoke from their mutual confusion and trembling as each held to the other's arm, seeing the small shadow rush, luring them across the meadow.

'Oh, Will, I wish we could go home, I wish we could eat. But it's too late, we saw! We got to see more! Don't we?'

'Lord,' said Will miserably. 'I guess we do.'

And they ran together, following they didn't know what on out and away to who could possibly guess where.

19

Out on the highway the last faint watercolours of the sun were gone beyond the hills and whatever they were chasing was so far ahead as to be only a swiftfleck now shown in lamplight, now set free, running, into dark.

'Twentyeight!' gasped Jim, 'Twentyeight times!'

'The merrygoround, sure!' Will jerked his head. 'Twentyeight times I counted, it went around back!'

Up ahead the small shape stopped and looked back.

Jim and Will ducked in by a tree and let it move on.

'It', thought Will. Why do I think 'it'? He's a boy, he's a man. . .no. . .it is something that has changed, that's what it is.

They reached and passed the city limits, and swiftly jogging, Will said, Jim, there must've been two people on that ride, Mr Cooger and this boy and - '

'No. I never took my eyes off him!'

They ran by the barber shop. Will saw but did not see a sign in the window. He read but did not read. He remembered, he forgot. He plunged on.

'Hey! He's turned on Culpepper Street! Quick!'

They rounded a corner.

'He's gone!'

The street lay long and empty in the lamplight.

Leaves blew on the hopscotchchalked sidewalks.

'Will, Miss Foley lives on this street.'

'Sure, fourth house, but - '

Jim strolled, casually whistling, hands in pockets, Will with him. At Miss Foley's house they glanced up.

In one of the softly lit front windows, someone stood looking out.

A boy, no more and no less than twelve years old.

'Will!' cried Jim, softly. 'That boy - '

'Her nephew. . .?'

'Nephew, heck! Keep your head away. Maybe he can read lips. Walk slow. To the corner and back. You see his face? The eyes, Will! That's one part of people don't change, young, old, six or sixty! Boy's face, sure, but the eyes were the eyes of Mr Cooger!'

'No!'

'Yes!'

They both stopped to enjoy the swift pound of each other's heart.

'Keep moving.' They moved. Jim held Will's arm tight, leading him. 'You did see Mr Cooger's eyes huh? When he held us up fit to crack our heads together? You did see the boy, just off the ride? He looked right up near me, hid in the tree, and boy! It was like opening the door of a furnace! I'll never forget those eyes! And there they are now, in the window. Turn around. Now, let's walk back easy and nice and slow. . . .We got to warn Miss Foley what's hiding in her house, don't we?'

'Jim, look, you don't give a darn about Miss Foley or what's in her house!'

Jim said nothing. Walking arm in arm with Will he just looked over at his friend and blinked once, let the lids come down over his shiny green eyes and go up.

And again Will had the feeling about Jim that he had always had about an old almost forgotten dog. Some time every year that dog, good for many months, just ran on out into the world and didn't come back for days and finally did limp back all burred and scrawny and odorous of swamps and dumps; he had rolled in the dirty mangers and foul droppingplaces of the world, simply to turn home with a funny little smile pinned to his muzzle. Dad had named the dog Plato, the wilderness philosopher, for you saw by his eyes there was nothing he didn't know. Returned, the dog would live in innocence again, tread patterns of grace, for months, then vanish, and the whole thing start over. Now, walking here he thought he heard Jim whimper under his breath. He could feel the bristles stiffen all over Jim. He felt Jim's ears flatten, saw him sniff the new dark. Jim smelled smells that no one knew, heard ticks from clocks that told another time. Even his tongue was strange now, moving along his lower, and now his upper lip as they stopped in

front of Miss Foley's house again.

The front window was empty.

'Going to walk up and ring the bell,' said Jim.

'What, meet him face to face?!'

'My aunt's eyebrows, Will We got to check, don't we? Shake his paw, stare him in his good eye or some such ,and if it is him - '

'We don't warn, Miss Foley right in front of him, do we?'

'We'll phone her later, dumb. Up we go!'

Will sighed and let himself be walked up the steps wanting but not wanting to know if the boy in this house had Mr Cooger hid but showing like a firefly between his eyelashes.

Jim rang the bell.

'What if he answers?' Will demanded. 'Boy, I'm so scared I could sprinkle dust. Jim, why aren't you scared, why?'

Jim examined both of his untrembled hands. I'll be darned,' he gasped. 'You're right! I'm not!'

The door swung wide.

Miss Foley beamed out at them.

'Jim! Will! How nice.'

'Miss Foley,' blurted Will. 'You okay?

Jim glared at him. Miss Foley laughed.

'Why shouldn't I be?'

Will flushed. 'All those darn carnival mirrors - '

'Nonsense, I've forgotten all about it. Well, boys, are you coming in?

She held the door wide.

Will shuffled a foot and stopped.

Beyond Miss Foley, a beaded curtain hung like a dark blue thunder shower across the parlour entry.

Where the coloured rain touched the floor, a pair of dusty small shoes poked out. Just beyond the downpour the evil boy loitered.

Evil? Will blinked. Why evil? Because. 'Because' was reason enough. A boy, yes, and evil.

'Robert?' Miss Foley turned, calling through the dark blue alwaysfalling beads of rain. She took Will's hand and gently pulled him inside. 'Come meet two of my students.'

The rain poured aside. A fresh candypink hand broke through, all by itself, as if testing the weather in the hall.

Good grief, thought Will, he'll look me in the eye! see

the merrygoround and himself on it moving back, back. I know it's printed on my eyeball like I been struck by lightning!

'Miss Foley!' said Will.

Now a pink face stuck out through the dim frozen necklaces of storm.

'We got to tell you a terrible thing.'

Jim struck Will's elbow, hard, to shut him.

Now the body came out through the dark watery flow of beads. The rain shushed behind the small boy.

Miss Foley leaned toward him, expectant. Jim gripped his elbow, fiercely. He stammered, flushed, then spat it out:

'Mr Crosetti!'

Quite suddenly, clearly he saw the sign in the barber's window. The sign seen but not seen as they ran by:

CLOSED ON ACCOUNT OF ILLNESS.

'Mr Crosetti!' he repeated, and added swiftly. 'He's. . .dead!'

'What. . .the barber?'

'The barber?' echoed Jim.

'See this haircut?' Will turned, trembling, his hand to his head. 'He did it. And we just walked by there and the sign was up and people told us - '

'What a shame.' Miss Foley was reaching out to fetch the strange boy forward: 'I'm so sorry. Boys, this is Robert, my nephew from Wisconsin.'

Jim stuck out his hand. Robert the Nephew examined it, curiously. 'What are you looking at?' he asked.

'You look familiar,' said Jim.

Jim! Will yelled to himself.

'Like an uncle of mine,' said Jim, all sweet and calm.

The nephew flicked his eyes to Will, who looked only at the floor, afraid the boy would see his eyeballs whirl with the remembered carousel. Crazily, he wanted to hum the backward music.

Now, he thought, face him!

He looked up straight at the boy.

And it was wild and crazy and the floor sank away beneath for there was the pink shiny Hallowe'en mask of a small pretty boy's face, but almost as if holes were cut where the eyes of Mr Cooger shone out, old, old, eyes as bright as sharp blue stars and the light from those stars taking a

million years to get here. And through the little nostrils cut in the shiny mask, Mr Cooger's breath went in steam, came out ice. And the Valentine candy tongue moved small behind those trim white candykernel teeth.

Mr Cooger, somewhere behind the eyeslits, went blinkclick with his insectKodak pupils. The lenses exploded like suns, then burnt chilly and serene again.

He swivelled his glance to Jim. Blinkclick. He had Jim flexed, focused, shot, developed, dried, filed away in the dark. Blinkclick.

Yet this was only a boy standing in a hall with two other boys and a women. . .

And all the while Jjm gazed steadily, back, feathers unruffled, taking his own pictures of Robert.

'Have you boys had supper?', asked Miss Foley. 'We're just sitting down - '

'We got to go!'

Everyone looked at Will as if amazed he didn't want to stick here forever.

'Jim - ' he stammered. 'Your mom's home alone - '

'Oh, sure,' Jim said, reluctantly.

'I know what.' The nephew paused for their attention. When their faces turned, Mr Cooger inside the nephew went silently blinkclick, blinkclick, listening through the toy ears, watching through the toycharm eyes, whetting the doll's mouth with a Pekingese tongue. 'Join us later for dessert, huh?'

'Dessert?'

'I'm taking Aunt Willa to the carnival.' The boy stroked Miss Foley's arm until she laughed nervously.

'Carnival?' cried Will, and lowered his voice. 'Miss Foley, you said - '

'I said I was foolish and scared myself,' said Miss Foley. 'It's Saturday night the best night for tent shows and showing my nephew the sights.'

'Join us?' asked Robert, holding Miss Foley's hand. 'Later?'

'Great!' said Jim.

'Jim.' said Will. 'We been out all day. Your mom's sick.'

'I forgot.' Jim, flashed him a look filled with purest snakepoison.

Flick. The nephew made an Xray of both, showing them, no doubt, as cold bones trembling in warm flesh. He stuck out his hand.

'Tomorrow, then. Meet you by the sideshows.'

'Swell!' Jim grabbed the small hand.

'So long!' Will jumped out the door, then turned with a last agonized appeal to the teacher.

'Miss Foley. . .?'

'Yes, Will?'

Don't go with that boy, he thought. Don't go near the shows. Stay home, oh please! But then he said:

'Mr Crosetti's dead.'

She nodded, touched, waiting for his tears. And while she waited, he dragged Jim outside and the door swung shut on Miss Foley and the pink small face with the lenses in it going blinkclick, snapshotting two incoherent boys, and them fumbling down the steps in October dark, while the merrygoround started again in Will's head, rushing while the leaves in the trees above cracked and fried with wind. Aside, Will spluttered, 'Jim, you shook hands with him! Mr Cooger! You're not going to meet him!?'

'It's Mr Cooger, all right. Boy, those eyes. If I met him tonight, we'd solve the whole shooting match. What's eating you, Will?'

'Eating me!' At the bottom of the steps now, they tussled in fierce and frantic whispers, glancing up at the empty windows where, now and again, a shadow passed. Will stopped. The music turned in his head. Stunned, he squinched his eyes. 'Jim, the music that the calliope played when Mr Cooger got younger - '

'Yeah?'

'It was the “Funeral March”! Played backward!'

'Which “Funeral March”?

'Which! Jim, Chopin only wrote one tune! The “Funeral March”!'

'But why played backward?'

'Mr Cooger was marching away from the grave, not toward it, wasn't he, getting younger, smaller, instead of older and dropping dead?'

'Willy, you're terrific!'

'Sure, but - ' Will stiffened. 'He's there, The window, again. Wave at him. So long! Now, walk and whistle something. Not Chopin, for gosh sakes - '

Jim waved. Will waved. Both whistled, 'Oh, Susanna.'

The shadow gestured small in the high window.

The boys hurried off down the street.

Two suppers were waiting in two houses.

One parent yelled at Jim, two parents yelled at Will.

Both were sent hungry upstairs.

It started at seven o'clock It was done by seventhree.

Doors slammed. Locks Clanked.

Clocks ticked.

Will stood by the door. The telephone was locked away outside. And even if he called, Miss Foley wouldn't answer. By now she'd be gone beyond town. . .good grief? Anyway, what could he say? Miss Foley, that nephew's no nephew? That boy's no boy? Wouldn't she laugh? She would. For the nephew was a nephew, the boy was a boy, or seemed such.

He turned to the window. Jim, across the way, stood facing the same dilemma, in his room. Both struggled. It was too early to raise the windows and stagewhisper to each other. Parents below were busy growing crystalradio peachfuzz in their ears, alert.

The boys threw themselves on their separate beds in their separate houses, probed mattresses for chocolate chunks put away against the lean years, and ate moodily.

Clocks ticked.

Nine. Ninethirty. Ten.

The knob rattled, softly, as Dad unlocked the door.

Dad! thought Will. Come in! We got to talk!

But Dad chewed his breath in the hall. Only his confusion, his always puzzled, halfbewildered face could be felt beyond the door.

He won't come in, thought Will. Walk around, talk around, back off from a thing, yes. But come sit, listen? When had he, when would he, ever?

'Will. . .?

Will quickened.

"Will. . .' said Dad, 'be careful.'

'Careful?' cried mother, coming along the hall. 'Is that all you're going to say?'

'What else?' Dad was going downstairs now. 'He jumps, I creep. How can you get two people together like that? He's too young, I'm too old. God, sometimes I wish we'd never. . .'

The door shut. Dad was walking away on the sidewalk.

Will wanted to fling up the window and call. Suddenly, Dad was so lost in the night. Not me, don't worry about me, Dad, he thought, you, Dad, stay in! It's not safe! Don't go!

But he didn't shout. And when he softly raised the window at last, the street was empty, and he knew it would be just a matter of time before that light went on in the library across town. When rivers flooded, when fire fell from the sky, what a fine place the library was, the many rooms, the books. With luck, no one found you. How could they! - when you were off to Tanganyika in '98, Cairo in 1812, Florence in 1492!?

'. . .careful. . .'

What did Dad mean? Did he smell the panic, had he heard the music, had he prowled near the tents? No. Not Dad ever.

Will tossed a marble over at Jim's window.

Tap. Silence.

He imagined Jim seated alone in the dark, his breath like phosphorous on the air, ticking away to himself.

Tap. Silence.

This wasn't like Jim. Always before, the window slid up, Jim's head popped out, ripe with yells, secret hissings, giggles, riots and rebel charges.

'Jim, I know you're there!'

Tap.

Silence.

Dad's out in the town. Miss Foley's with youknowwho! he thought. Good gosh, Jim, we got to do something! Tonight!

He threw a last marble.

. . .tap. . .

It fell to the hushed grass below.

Jim did not come to the window.

Tonight, thought Will. He bit his knuckles. He lay back cold straight stiff on his bed.

21

In the alley behind the house was a huge oldfashioned pineplank boardwalk. It had been there ever since Will remembered, since civilization unthinkingly poured forth the dull hard unresisting cement sidewalks. His grandfather, a man of strong sentiment and wild impulse, who let nothing go without a roar, had flexed his muscles in favour of this vanishing landmark, and with a dozen handymen had toted a good forty feet of the walk into the alley where it had lain like the skeleton of some indefinable monster through the

years, baked by sun, lushly rotted by rains.

The town clock struck ten.

Lying abed, Will realized he had been thinking about Grandfather's vast gift from another time. He was waiting to hear the boardwalk speak. In what language? Well. . .

Boys have never been known to go straight up to houses to ring bells to summon forth friends. They prefer to chunk dirt at clapboards, hurl acorns down roof shingles, or leave mysterious notes flapping from kites stranded on attic window sills.

So it was with Jim and Will.

Late nights, if there were gravestones to be leapfrogged or dead cats to be hurled down sour people's chimneys, one or the other of the boys would prowl out under the moon and xylophonedance on that old hollowechoing musical boardwalk.

Over the years, they had tuned the walk, prising up an A board and nailing it here, lifting up an F board and pounding it back down there until the walk was as near onto being melodious as weather and two entrepreneurs could fashion it.

By the tune treaded out, you could tell the night's venture. If Will heard Jim tramping hard on seven or eight notes of 'Way Down Upon the Swanee River,' he scrambled out knowing it was moontrail time on the creek leading to the river caves. If Jim heard Will out leaping about like a scalded airedale on the timbers and the tune remotely suggested 'Marching Through Georgia,' it meant plums, peaches, or apples were ripe enough to get sick on out beyond town.

So this night Will held his breath waiting for some tune to call him forth.

What kind of tune would Jim play to represent the carnival, Miss Foley, Mr Cooger, and/or the evil nephew?

Tenfifteen. Tenthirty.

No music.

Will did not like Jim sitting in his room thinking what? Of the Mirror Maze? What had he seen there? And, seeing, what did he plan?

Will stirred, restively.

Especially he did not like to think of Jim with no father between him and the tent shows and all that lay dark in the meadows. And a mother who wanted him around so very much, he just had to get away, get out, breathe free night air,

know free night waters running toward bigger freer seas.

Jim! he thought. Let's have the music!

And at tenthirtyfive, it came.

He heard, or thought he heard, Jim out in the starlight leaping way up and coming flat down like a spring tomcat on the vast xylophone. And the tune! Was or wasn't it like the funeral dirge played backward by the old carousel calliope?!!

Will started to raise his window to be sure. But suddenly, Jim's window slid quietly up.

He hadn't been down on the boards! It was just Will's wild wish that made the tune! Will started to whisper, but stopped.

For Jim, without a word, scuttled down the drainpipe.

Jim! Will thought.

Jim, on the lawn, stiffened as if hearing his name.

You're not going without me, Jim?

Jim glanced swiftly up.

If he saw Will, he made no sign.

Jim, Will thought, we're still pals, smell things nobody else smells, hear things no one else hears, got the same blood, run the same way. Now this first time ever, you're sneaking out! Ditching me!

But the driveway was empty.

A salamander flicking the hedge, there went Jim.

Will was out the window, down the trellis, and over the hedge, before he thought: I'm alone. If I lose Jim, it's the first time I'll be out alone at night, too. And where am I going? Wherever Jim goes.

Lord, let me keep up!

Jim skimmed like a dark owl after a mouse. Will loped like a weaponless hunter after the owl. They sailed their shadows over October lawns.

And when they stopped. . .

There was Miss Foley's house.

22

Jim glanced back.

Will became a bush behind a bush, a shadow among shadows, with two starlight rounds of glass, his eyes, holding the image of Jim calling up in a whisper toward the secondfloor windows.

'Hey there. . .hey. . .'

Good grief, thought Will, he wants to be slit and stuffed

with broken Mirror Maze glass.

'Hey!' called Jim, softly. 'You. . .!'

A shadow uprose on a dimlit shade, above. A small shadow. The nephew had brought Miss Foley home, they were in their separate rooms or - Oh Lord, thought Will, I hope she's safe home. Maybe, like the lightningrod salesman, she -

'Hey. . .!'

Jim gazed up with that funny warm look of breathless anticipation he often had nights in summer at the shadowshow window Theatre in that house a few streets over. Looking up with love, with devotion, like a cat Jim waited for some special dark mouse to run forth. Crouched, now slowly he seemed to grow taller, as if his bones were pulled by the in the window above, which now suddenly vanished.

Will ground his teeth.

He felt the shadow sift down through the house like a cold breath. He could wait no longer. He leaped forth.

'Jim!'

He seized Jim's arm.

'Will, what you doing here?!'

'Jim, don't talk to him! Get out of here. My gosh, he'll chew and spit out your bones!'

Jim writhed himself free.

'Will, go home! You'll spoil everything!'

'He scares me, Jim, what you want from him!? This afternoon. . .in the maze, did you see something!!?'

'. . .Yes. . .'

'For gosh sakes, what!'

Will grabbed Jim's shirt front, felt his heart bang under the chest bones. 'Jim - '

'Let go.' Jim was terribly quiet. 'If he knows you're here, he won t come out. Willy, if you don't let go, I'll remember when - '

'When what!'

'When I'm older, darn it, older!'

Jim spat.

As if he was struck by lightning, Will jumped back.

He looked at his empty hands and put one up to wipe the spittle off his cheek.

'Oh, Jim,' he mourned.

And he heard the merrygoround motioning, gliding on black night waters around, around, and Jim on a black

stallion riding off and about, circling in treeshadow and he wanted to cry out, Look! the merrygoround I you want it to go forward, don't you, Jim? forward instead of back! and you on it, around once and you're fifteen, circling and you're sixteen, three times more and nineteen! music! and you're twenty and off, standing tall! not Jim any more, still thirteen, almost fourteen on the empty midway, with me small, me young, me scared!

Will hauled off and hit Jim, hard, on the nose.

Then he jumped Jim, wrapped him tight, and toppled him rolling down, yelling, in the bushes. He slapped Jim's mouth, stuffed it, mashed it full of fingers to snap and bite at, suffocating the angry grunts and yells.

The front door opened.

Will crushed the air out of Jim, lay heavy on him, fisting his mouth tight.

Something stood on the porch. A tiny shadow scanned the town, searching for but not finding Jim.

But it was just the boy Robert, the friendly nephew, come almost casually forth, hands in pockets, whistling under his breath, to breathe the night air as boys do, curious for adventures that they themselves must make, that rarely happen by. Threshed tight, mortally locked and bound to Jim, staring up, Will was all the more shaken to see the normal boy, the airy glance, the unassuming poise, the small, the easy self in which no man at all was revealed by street light.

At any moment, Robert, in full cry, might leap to play with them, tangle legs, lock arms, barksnap like pups in May, the whole thing end with them strewn in laughing tears on the lawn, the terror spent, the fear melted off in dew, a dream of nothings quickly gone such as dreams go when the eye snaps wide. For there indeed stood the nephew, his face round fresh, and creamsmooth as a peach.

And he was smiling down at the two boys he now saw locked limb in limb on the grass.

Then, swiftly, he darted in. He must have run upstairs, scrabbled about, and hurtled down again, for suddenly as the two boys outthrashed outgripped, outraged each other, there was a rain of tinkling, rattling glitter on the lawn.

The nephew leaped the porch rail and landed panthersoft, imbedded in his shadow, on the grass. His hands were delicious with stars. These he liberally sprinkled. They thudded, slithered, winked at Jim's side. Both boys lay

stricken by the rain of gold and diamond fire that pelted them.

'Help, police!' cried Robert.

Will was so shocked he let go Jim.

Jim was so shocked he let go Will.

Both reached at the same time for the cold strewn ice.

'Good grief, a bracelet!'

'A ring! A necklace!'

Robert kicked. Two trash cans at the curb fell thundering.

A bedroom light, above, flicked on.

'Police!' Robert threw one last spray of glitter at their feet, shut up his freshpeach smile like locking an explosion away in a box, and shot away down the street.

'Wait!' Jim jumped. 'We won't hurt you!'

Will tripped him, Jim fell.

The window upstairs opened. Miss Foley leaned out. Jim, on his knees, held a woman's wrist watch. Will blinked at a necklace in his hands.

'Who's there!' she cried. 'Jim? Will? What's that you got?!

But Jim was running. Will stopped only long enough to see the window empty itself with a wail as Miss Foley pulled in to see her room. When he heard her full scream, he knew she had discovered the burglary.

Running, Will knew he was doing just what the nephew wanted. He should turn back, pick up the jewels, tell Miss Foley what happened. But he must save Jim!

Far back, he heard Miss Foley's new cries turn on more lights! Will Halloway! Jim Nightshade! Night runners! Thieves! That's us, thought Will, oh my Lord! That's us! No one'll believe anything we say from now on! Not about carnivals, not about carousels, not about mirrors or evil nephews, not about nothing!

And so they ran, three animals in starlight. A black otter. A tomcat. A rabbit.

Me, thought Will, I'm the rabbit.

And he was white, and much afraid.

23

They hit the carnival grounds at a good twenty miles an hour, give or take a mile, the nephew in the lead, Jim close behind, and Will further back, gasping, shotgun blasts of

fatigue in his feet, his head, his heart.

The nephew, running scared, looked back, not smiling.

Fooled him, thought Will, he figured I wouldn't follow, figured I'd call the police, get stuck, not be believed, or run hide. Now he's scared I'll beat the tar out of him, and wants to jump on that ride and run around getting older and bigger than me. Oh, Jim, Jim, we got to stop him, keep him young, tear his skin off!

But he knew from Jim's running there'd be no help from Jim. Jim wasn't running after nephews. He was running toward free rides.

The nephew vanished around a tent far ahead. Jim followed. By the time Will reached the midway, the merrygoround was popping to life. In the pulse, the din, the squealaround of music the small freshfaced nephew rode the great platform in a swirl of midnight dust.

Jim, ten feet back, watched the horses leap, his eyes striking fire from the highjumped stallion's eyes.

The merrygoround was going forward!

Jim leaned at it.

'Jim!' cried Will.

The nephew swept from sight borne around by the machine. Drifted back again he stretched out pink fingers urging softly: '. . .Jim. . .?'

Jim twitched one foot forward.

'No!' Will plunged.

He knocked, seized, held Jim; they toppled; they fell in a heap.

The nephew, surprised, whisked on in darkness, one year older. One year older, thought Will, on the earth, one year taller, bigger, meaner!

'Oh God, Jim, quick!' He jumped up, ran to the control box, the complex mysteries of brass switch and porcelain covering and sizzling wires. He struck the switch. But Jim, behind, babbling, tore at Will's hands.

'Will, you'll spoil it! No!'

Jim knocked the switch full back.

Will spun and slapped his face. Each clenched the other's elbows, rocked, failed. They fell against the control box.

Will saw the evil boy, a year older still, glide around into night. Five or six more times around and he'd be bigger than the two of them!

'Jim, he'll kill us!'

'Not me, no!'

Will felt a sting of electricity. He yelled, pulled back, hit the switch handle. The control box spat. Lightning jumped to the sky. Jim and Will, flung by the blast, lay watching the merrygoround run wild.

The evil boy whistled by, clenched to a brass tree. He cursed. He spat. He wrestled with wind, with centrifuge. He was trying to clutch his way through the horses, the poles, to the outer rim of the carousel. His face came, went, came, went. He clawed. He brayed. The control box erupted blue showers. The carousel jumped and bucked. The nephew slipped. He fell. A black stallion's steel hoof kicked him. Blood printed his brow.

Jim hissed, rolled., thrashed Will riding him hard, pressing him to grass, trading yell for yell, both frightpale, heart ramming heart. Electric bolts from the switch flushed up in white stars a gush of fireworks. The carousel spun thirty, spun forty - 'Will, let me up!' - spun fifty times. The calliope howled, boiled steam, ran ancient dry, then played nothing, its keys gibbering as only chitterings boiled up through the vents. Lightning unravelled itself over the sweated outflung boys, delivered flame to the silent horse stampede to light their way around, around with the figure lying on the platform no longer a boy but a man, no longer a man but more than a man and even more and even more, much more than that, around, around.

'He's he's, oh he's, oh look, Will, he's - ' gasped Jim, and began to sob, because it was the only thing to do, locked down, nailed tight. 'Oh God, Will, get up! We got to make it run backward!'

Lights flashed on in the tents.

But no one came out.

Why not? Will thought crazily. The explosions? The electric storm? Do the freaks think the whole world's jumping through the midway? Where's Mr Dark? In town? Up to no good? What, where, why?

He thought he heard the agonized figure sprawled on the carousel platform drum his heart superfast, then slow, fast, slow, very fast, very slow, incredibly fast, then as slow as the moon going down the sky on a white night in winter.

Someone, something, on the carousel wailed faintly.

Thank God it's dark, thought Will. Thank God, I can't see. There goes someone. Here comes something. There, whatever it is, goes again. There. . . there. . .

A black shadow on the shuddering machine tried to stagger up, but it was late, late, later still, very late, latest of all, oh, very late. The shadow crumbled. The carousel, like the earth spinning, whipped away air, sunlight, sense and sensibility, leaving only dark, cold, and age.

In a final vomit, the switch box blew itself completely apart.

All the carnival lights blinked out.

The carousel slowed itself through the cold night wind.

Will let Jim go.

How many times, thought Will, did it go around? Sixty, eighty. . .ninety. . .?

How many times? said Jim's face, all nightmare, watching the dead carousel shiver and halt in the dead grass, a stopped world now which nothing, not their hearts, hands or heads, could send back anywhere.

They walked slowly to the merrygoround, their shoes whispering.

The shadowy figure lay on the near side, on the plank floor, its face turned away.

One hand hung off the platform.

It did not belong to a boy.

It seemed a huge wax hand shrivelled by fire.

The man's hair was long, spidery, white. It blew like milkweed in the breathing dark.

They bent to see the face.

The eyes were mummified shut. The nose was collapsed upon gristle. The mouth was a ruined white flower, the petals twisted into a thin wax sheath over the clenched teeth through which faint bubblings sighed. The man was small inside his clothes small as a child, but tall, strung out, and old, so old, very old, not ninety, not one hundred, no, not one hundred and ten, but one hundred and twenty or one hundred and impossible years old.

Will touched.

The man was cold as an albino frog.

He smelled of moon swamps and old Egyptian bandages. He was something found in museums, wrapped in nicotine linens, sealed in glass.

But he was alive, puling like a babe, and shrivelling unto death, fast, very fast, before their eyes.

Will was sick over the side of the carousel.

Then, falling against each other, Jim and Will sledgehammered the insane leaves, the unbelievable grass,

the insubstantial earth with their numbed shoes, fleeing off down the midway. . .

24

Moths ticked off the high tinshaded arc light which swung abandoned above the crossroads. Below, in a deserted gas station in the midst of country wilderness there was another ticking. In a coffinsized phone booth speaking to people lost somewhere across night hills, two whitefaced boys were crammed, holding to each other at every flit of bat, each sliding of cloud across the stars.

Will hung up the phone. The police and an ambulance were coming.

At first he and Jim had shoutwhisperedwheezed at each other, pumping along, stumbling: they should go home, sleep, forget - no! they should take a freight train west! - no! for Mr Cooger, if he survived what they'd done to him, that old man, that old old old man, would follow them over the world until he found them and tore them apart! Arguing, shivering, they ended up in a phone booth, and now saw the police car bouncing along the road, its siren moaning, with the ambulance behind. All the men looked out at the two boys whose teeth chattered in the mothflicked light.

Three minutes later they all advanced down the dark midway, Jim leading the way, talking, gibbering.

'He's alive. He's got to be alive. We didn't mean to do it! We're sorry!' He stared at the black tents. 'You hear? We're sorry!'

'Take it easy, boy,' said one of the policemen. 'Go on.'

The two policemen in midnight blue, the two internes like ghosts, the two boys, made the last turn past the ferris wheel and reached the merrygoround.

Jim groaned.

The horses trampled the night air, in midplunge. Starlight glittered on the brass poles. That was all.

'He's gone. . . .'

'He was here, we swear!' said Jim. 'One hundred and fifty, two hundred years old, and dying of it!'

'Jim' said Will.

The four men stirred uneasily.

'They must've taken him in a tent.' Will started off. A policeman took his elbow.

'Did you say one hundred and fifty years old?' he asked

Jim. 'Why not three hundred?'

'Maybe he was! Oh God.' Jim turned, yelling. 'Mr Cooger! We brought help!'

Lights blinked on in the Freak Tent. The huge banners out front rumbled and lashed as arc lights flushed over them. The police glanced up. MR SKELETON, THE DUST WITCH, THE CRUSHER, VESUVIO THE LAVA SIPPFR! danced soft, big, painted each on its separate flag.

Jim paused by the rustling freak show entry.

'Mr Cooger?' he pleaded. 'You. . .there?'

The tent flaps mouthed out a warm lion air.

'What?' asked a policeman.

Jim read the moving flaps.

'They said “yes.” They said, “Come in.”

Jim stepped through. The others followed.

Inside they squinted through crisscrossed tent pole shadows to the high freak platforms and all the worldwandered aliens, crippled of face of bone, of mind, waiting there.

At a rickety card table nearby four men sat playing orange, limegreen, sunyellow cards printed with moon beasts and winged sunsymbolled men. Here the akimbo Skeleton one might play like a piccolo; here the Blimp who could be punctured every night, pumped up at dawn; here the midget known as The Wart who could be mailed parcel post dirtcheap; and next to him an even littler accident of cell and time, a Dwarf so small and perched in such a way you could not see his face behind the cards clenched before him in arthritic and tremulous oakgnarled fingers.

The Dwarf! Will started. Something about those hands! Familar, familiar. Where? Who? What? But his eyes snapped on.

There stood Monsieur Guillotine, black tights, black long stockings, black hood over head, arms crossed over his chest, stiff straight by his chopping machine the blade high in the tent sky, a hungry knife all flashes and meteor shine, much desiring to cleave space. Below, in the head cradle, a dummy sprawled waiting quick doom.

There stood the Crusher, all ropes and tendons, all steel and iron all bonemonger, jawcruncher, horseshoetaffypuller.

And there the Lava Sipper, Vesuvio of the chafed tongue, of the scalded teeth, who spun scores of fireballs up, hissing in a ferris of flame which streaked shadows along the tent roof.

Nearby, in booths, another thirty freaks watched the fires fly until the Lava Sipper glanced, saw intruders, and let his universe fall. The suns drowned in a water tub.

Steam billowed. All froze in a tableau.

An insect stopped buzzing.

Will glanced swiftly.

There, on the biggest stage, a tattoo needle poised like a blowgun dart in his rosecrusted hand, stood Mr Dark, the Illustrated Man.

His picture crowds flooded raw upon his flesh. Stripped bare to the navel, he had been stinging himself, adding a picture to his left palm with this dragonfly contraption. Now with the insect droned dead in his hand, he wheeled. But Will, staring beyond him, cried:

'There he is! There's Mr Cooger!'

The police, the internes, quickened.

Behind Mr Dark sat the Electric Chair.

In this chair sat a ruined man, last seen strewn wheezing in a collapse of bones and albino wax on the broken carousel. Now he was erected, propped, strapped in this device full of lightning power.

'That's him! He was. . .dying.'

The Blimp ascended to his feet.

The Skeleton spun about, tall.

The Wart fleahopped to the sawdust.

The Dwarf let fall his cards and flirted his now mad, now idiot eyes ahead, around, over.

I know him, thought Will. Oh. God, what they've done to him!

The lightningrod salesman!

That's who it was. Squeezed tight, smashed small, convulsed by some terrible nature into a clenched fist of humanity. . .

The seller of lightningrods.

But now two things happened with beautiful promptitude.

Monsieur Guillotine cleared his throat.

And the blade, above, in the canvas sky, like a homing hawk scythed down. Whisperwhiskslitherthunderrushwham!

The dummy head, chopcut, fell.

And falling, looked like Will's own head, own face, destroyed.

He wanted, he did not want, to run lift the head turn it to see if it held his own profile. But how could you ever dare

do that? Never, never in a billion years, could one empty that wicker basket.

The second happened.

A mechanic, working at the back of an upright glassfronted coffin booth, released a trip wire. This made a last cog click within the machinery under the sign, MLLE TAROT, THE DUST WITCH. The wax woman's figure within the glass box nodded her head and fixed the boys with her pointing nose as the boys passed, leading the men. Her cold wax hand brushed the Dust of Destiny on a ledge within the coffin. Her eyes did not see; they were sewn shut with laced blackwidow web, dark threads. A waxworks fright, good and proper, she was, and the policemen beamed, viewing her, and strolled on, and beamed at Monsieur Guillotine for his act too, and moving, the police were relaxing now, and seemed not to mind being called late on a jolly venture into a rehearsing world of acrobats and seedy magicians.

'Gentlemen!' Mr Dark and his mob of illustrations surged forward on the pine platform, a jungle beneath each arm, an Egyptian viper scrolled on each bicep. 'Welcome! You're just in time! We're rehearsing all our new acts!' Mr Dark waved and strange monsters gaped their fangs from his chest, a Cyclops with a navel for a squinted moron eye twitched on his stomach as he strode.

Lord, thought Will, is he bringing that crowd with him or is the crowd pulling him along by his skin?

From all the creaked platforms, from the muffled sawdust, Will felt the freaks wheel and fix their eyes, enchanted, as were internes and police, by this illustrated throng of humanity that in one agglomerative move dominated and filled the immediate air and tent sky with silent shootings for attention.

Now part of the waspneedle tattooed population spoke. It was Mr Dark's mouth over and above this calligraphic explosion, this railroad accident of monsters in tumult upon his sweating skin. Mr Dark chanted forth the organ tones from his chest. His personal electric bluegreen populations trembled, even as the real freaks on the sawdust tent floor trembled, even as, hearing in their most secret marrow, Jim and Will trembled and felt more freak than the freaks themselves.

'Gentlemen! Boys! We've just perfected the new act! You'll be the first to see!' cried Mr Dark.

The first policeman, his hand casually nestled to his

pistol holster, squinted up at that vast corral of beasts and beings. 'This boy said - '

'Said?!' The Illustrated Man barked a laugh. The freaks leaped in a frolic of shock, then calmed as the carnival owner continued with great ease, patting and soothing his own illustrations, which somehow patted and soothed the freaks. 'Said? But what did he see? Boys always scare themselves at sideshows, eh? Run like rabbits when the freaks pop out. But tonight, especially tonight!'

The policemen glanced beyond to the Erectorsetpapier mâché relic constricted in the Electric Chair.

'Who's he?'

Will saw fire lick up through Mr Dark's smokeclouded eyes, saw him just as quickly snuff it out. 'The new act. Mr Electrico.'

'No! Look at the old man! Look!' Will yelled. The police turned to appraise his demon cry.

'Don't you see!' said Will. 'He's dead! Only thing holds him up is the straps!'

The internes gazed up at the great flake of winter flung into and held by the black chair.

Oh gosh, thought Will, we thought it would all be simple. The old man, Mr Cooger, dying, so we bring doctors to save him, so he forgives us, maybe, maybe, the carnival doesn't hurt us, lets us go. But now this, what's next? He's dead! It's too late! Everyone hates us!

And Will stood among the others feeling the cold air waft down from the unearthed mummy, from the cold mouth and cold eyes locked up in frozen eyelids. Inside the frozen nostrils not a white hair stirred. Mr Cooger's ribs under his collapsed shirt were stonerigid and his teeth under his clay lips were dryice cold. Put him out at noon and fog would steam off him.

The internes glanced at each other. They nodded.

The policemen, at this, took one step forward.

'Gentlemen!'

Mr Dark scuttled a tarantula hand up an electric brass switchboard.

'One hundred thousand volts will now bum Mr Electrico's body!

'No don't let him! Will cried.

The policemen took another step. The internes opened their mouths to speak. Mr Dark flicked a swift demanding glance at Jim. Jim cried:

'No! It's all right!'

'Jim!'

'Will, yes, it's okay!'

'Stand back!' The spider clutched the switch handle. 'This man is in a trance! As part of our new act, I have hypnotized him! He could suffer injury if you shocked him from his spell!'

The internes shut their mouths. The police stopped moving.

'One hundred thousand volts! Yet he will come forth alive, whole in sound mind and body!'

'No!'

A policeman grabbed Will.

The Illustrated Man and all the men and beasts asprawl in frenzies on him now snatched and banged the switch.

The tent lights snuffed out.

Policemen, internes, boys jumped up their flesh in cobbles and boils.

But now in the swift midnight shuttering, the Electric Chair was a hearth and on it the old man blazed like a blue autumn tree.

The police flinched back, the internes leaned ahead, as did the freaks, blue fire in their eyes.

The Illustrated Man hand glued to switch, looked upon the old old old man.

The old man was flintrock dead, yes, but electricity alive sheathed over him. It swarmed on his cold shell ears, it flickered in his deepasanabandonedstonewell nostrils. It crept blue eels of power on his prayingmantis fingers and his grasshopper knees.

'The Illustrated Man's lips thrust wide., perhaps he yelled, but no one heard against the immense fry, blast, the slam and sizzle of power which prowled in around over under about man and prisoning chair. Come alive! cried the hum! Come alive! cried the storming colour and light. Come alive! yelled Mr Dark's mouth, which no one heard but Jim, reading lips, read thunderous loud in his mind, and Will the same, Come alive! willing the old man to five, start up, tick, hum, work juice, summon spit, ungum spirit, melt wax soul. . . .

'He's dead!' But no one heard Will, either, no matter how he pushed against the lightning clamour.

Alive! Mr Dark's lips licked and savoured. Alive. Come alive. He racheted the switch to the last notch. Live, live!

Somewhere, dynamos protested, skirled, shrilled, moaned a bestial energy. The fight turned bottlegreen. Dead dead, thought Will. But live alive! cried machines, cried flame and fire, cried mouths of crowds of livid beasts on illustrated flesh.

So the old man's hair stood up in prickling fumes. Sparks, bled from his fingernails, dripped seething spatters on pine planks. Green simmerings wove shuttles through dead eyelids.

The Illustrated Man bent violently above the old old dead dead thing, his prides of beasts drowned deep in sweat, his right hand thrust in hammering demand upon the air: Live, live.

And the old man came alive.

Will Yelled himself hoarse.

And no one heard.

For now, very slowly, as if roused by thunder, as if the electric fire were new dawn, one dead eyelid peeled itself slowly open.

The freaks gaped.

A long way off in the storm, Jim was yelling, too, for Will had his elbow tight and felt the yell pouring out through the bones, as the old man's lips fell apart and frightful sizzles zigzagged between lips and threaded teeth.

The Illustrated Man cut the power to a whine. Then, turning, he fell to his knees, and put out his hand .

Away off up there on the platform, there was the faintest stir as of an autumn leaf beneath the old man's shirt.

The freaks exhaled.

The old old man sighed.

Yes, Will thought, they're breathing for him, helping him, making him to live.

Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale - yet it looked like an act. What could he say, or do?

'. . .lungs so. . .so. . .so. . .' someone whispered.

The Dust Witch, back in her glass box?

Inhale. The freaks breathed. Exhale. Their shoulders slumped.

The old old man's lips trembled.

'. . .heart beat. . .one. . .two. . .so. . .so. . .'

The Witch again? Will feared to look.

A vein ticked a small watch in the old man's throat.

Very slowly now that right eye of the old man opened full wide, fixed, stared like a broken camera. It was like

looking through a hole in space, with no bottom forever. He grew warmer.

The boys, below, grew colder.

Now the old and terriblywisewithnightmare eye was so wide and so deep and so alive all to itself in that smashed porcelain face that there at the bottom of the eye somewhere the evil nephew peered along and out at the freaks, internes, police, and. . .

Will.

Will saw himself, saw Jim, two little pictures posed in reflection on that single eye. If the old man blinked, the two images would be crushed by his lid!

The Illustrated Man on his knees, turned at last and gentled all with his smile.

'Gentlemen, boys, here indeed is the man who lives with lightning!

The second policeman laughed; this motion shook his hand off his holster.

Will shuffled to the right.

The old spittleeye followed sucking at him with its emptiness.

Will squirmed left.

As did the phlegm that was the old man's gaze, while his chill lips peeled wide to shape, reshape an echoed gasp, a flutter. From deep below the old man bounced his voice ricocheting off the dank stone walls of his body until it fell out his mouth:

'. . .welcome. . .mmmmmm. . .'

The words fell back in.

'well. . .cummm. . .mmmm. . .'

The policemen nudged each other with identical smiles.

'No!' cried Will, suddenly. 'That's no act! He was dead! He'd die again if you cut the power - !'

Will slapped his own hand to his mouth.

0 Lord, he thought, what am I doing? I want him alive, so he'll forgive us, let us be! But, oh Lord, even more I want him dead, I want them all dead, they scare me so much I got hairballs big as cats in my stomach!

'I'm sorry. . .he whispered.

Don't be!' cried Mr Dark.

The freaks made a commotion of blinks and glares. What next from the statue in the cold sizzling chair? The old old man's one eye gummed itself. The mouth collapsed, a

bubble of yellow mud in a sulphur bath.

The Illustrated Man banged the switch a notch grinning wildly at no one. He thrust a steel sword in the old man's empty glovelike hand.

A drench of electricity prickled from the sere musicbox tines of the ancient stubbled cheeks. That deep eye showed swift as a bullet hole. Hungry for Will, it found and ate of his image. The lips steamed:

'I. . .sssaw. . .the. . .boysssssss. . .ssssneak into. . . hee tent. . .tttttt. . .'

The desiccated bellows refilled, then pinpunctured the swamp air out in faint wails:

'. . .We. . .rehearsing. . .sssso I thought. . .play. . .thissss trick. . .pretend to be. . .dead.'

Again the pause to drink oxygen like ale, electricity like wine.

'. . .let myself fall. . .like. . .I. . .wasssss. . .dying. . .The. . .boysssssssss. . .ssscreaming. . .ran!'

The old man husked out syllable on syllable.

'Ha.' Pause. 'Ha.' Pause. 'Ha.'

Electricity hemstitched the whistling lips.

The Illustrated Man coughed gently. 'This act, it tires Mr Electrico. . . .'

'Oh, sure.' One of the policemen started. 'Sorry.' He touched his cap. 'Fine show.'

'Fine,' said one of the internes.

Will glanced swiftly to see the interne's mouth, what it looked like saying this, but Jim stood in the way.

'Boys! A dozen free passes!' Mr Dark held them out. 'Here!'

Jim and Will didn't move.

'Well?' said one policeman.

Sheepishly, Will reached up for the flamecoloured tickets, but stopped as Mr Dark said, 'Your names?'

The officers winked at each other.

'Tell him, boys.'

Silence. The freaks watched.

'Simon,' said Jim. 'Simon Smith.

Mr Dark's hand, holding the tickets, constricted.

'Oliver,' said Will. 'Oliver Brown.'

The Illustrated Man sucked in a mighty breath. The freaks inhaled! The vast ingasped sigh might have, seemed to, stir Mr Electrico. His sword twitched. Its tip leaped to sparksting Will's shoulder, then sizzle over in bluegreen

explosions at Jim. Lightning shot Jim's shoulder.

The policemen laughed.

The old old man's one wide eye blazed.

'I dub thee. . .asses and foolssssss. . .I dub. . .thee. . .Mr Sickly. . .and. . .Mr Pale. . . !'

Mr Electrico finished. The sword tapped them.

'A. . .sssshort. . .sad life. . .for you both!'

Then his mouth slit shut, his raw eye glued over. Containing his cellar breath, he let the simple sparks swarm his blood like dark champagne.

'The tickets,' murmured Mr Dark. 'Free rides. Free rides. Come any time. Come back. Come back.'

Jim grabbed, Will grabbed the tickets.

They jumped, they bolted from the tent.

The police, smiling and waving all around, followed at their leisure.

The internes, not smiling, like ghosts in their white suits, came after.

They found the boys huddled in the back of the police car.

They looked as though they wanted to go home.

Something Wicked This Way Comes

II

Pursuits

25

She could feel the mirrors waiting for her in each room much the same as you felt, without opening your eyes, that the first snow of winter has just fallen outside your window.

Miss Foley had first noticed, some years ago, that her house crowded with bright shadows of herself. Best, then, to was ignore the cold sheets of December ice in the hall, above the bureaus, in the bath. Best skate the thin ice, lightly. Paused, the weight of your attention might crack the shell. Plunged through the crust, you might drown in depths so cold, so remote that all the Past lay carved in tombstone marbles there. Ice water would syringe your veins. Transfixed at the mirror sill you would stand forever, unable to lift your gaze from the proofs of Time.

Yet tonight, with the echo of the running feet of the three boys dying away, she kept feeling snow fall in the mirrors of her house. She wanted to thrust through the frames to test their weather. But she was afraid that doing this might cause all the mirrors to somehow assemble in billionfold multiplications of self, an army of women marching away to become girls and girls marching to become Infinitely small children. So many people, crammed in one house, would provoke suffocation.

So what must she do about mirrors, Will Halloway, Jim Nightshade, and. . .the nephew?

Strange. Why not say my nephew?

Because, she thought, from the first when he came in the door, he didn't belong, his proof was not proof, she kept waiting for. . .what?

Tonight. The carnival. Music, the nephew said, that must be heard, rides that must be ridden. Stay away from the maze where winter slept. Swim around with the carousel where summer, sweet as clover, honeygrass, and wild mint, kept its lovely time.

She looked out at the night lawn from which she had

not yet retrieved the scattered jewels. Somehow she guessed this was a way the nephew had of getting rid of the two boys who might stop her using this ticket she took from the mantel:

CAROUSEL. ADMIT ONE.

She had waited for the nephew to come back. With time passing, she must act on her own. Something must be done not to hurt no, but slow down interference from such as Jim and Will. No one must stand between her and nephew, her and carousel, her and lovely gliding ridearound summer.

The nephew had said as much, by saying nothing, by just holding her hands, and breathing bakedapplepie scent from his small pink mouth upon her face.

She lifted the telephone.

Across town she saw the light in the stone library building, as all the town had seen it, over the years. She dialled. A quiet voice answered. She said:

'Library? Mr Halloway? This is Miss Foley. Will's teacher. In ten minutes, please, meet me in the police station. . . .Mr Halloway?'

A pause.

'Are you still there. . .?

26

'I'd have sworn,' said one interne. 'When we first got there. . .that old man was dead.

The ambulance and the police car had pulled up at the same moment at the crossroads, going back into town. One of the intermes had called over. Now one of the policemen called back:

'You're joking!

The internes sat in their ambulance. They shrugged.

'Yeah. Sure. Joking.'

They drove on ahead their faces as quiet and white as their uniforms.

The police followed, with Jim and Will huddled in back, trying to say more, but the police started talking and laughing, retelling everything that happened to one another, so Will and Jim wound up lying, giving wrong names again, saying they lived around the comer from the police station.

They let the police drop them at two dark houses near the station and they ran up on those porches and grabbed the doorknobs and waited for the prowl car to swing off around

the corner into the station, and then they came down and followed and stood looking at the yellow lights of the station all suncoloured at midnight and Will glanced over and saw the whole evening come and go in Jim's face and Jim watching the police station windows as if at any moment darkness might fill every room and put the lights out forever.

On my way back into town, thought Will, I threw away my tickets. But - look. . .

Jim still has his, in his hand.

Will trembled.

What did Jim think, want, plan, now that dead men lived and only lived through the fire of whitehot electric chair machines? Did he stiff very much love carnivals? Will searched. Faint echoes, yes, they came, they went in Jim's eyes, for Jim, after all, was Jim, even standing here with the calm light of Justice falling on his cheekbones.

'The Chief of Police' Will said. 'He'd listen to us - '

'Yeah,' said Jim. 'He'd wake just long enough to send for the butterfly net. Hell, William, hell, even I don't believe what's happened the last twentyfour hours.'

'But we got to find someone higher up, keep trying, now we know what the score is.'

'Okay, what's the score? What's the carnival done so bad? Scared a woman with a mirror maze? So, she scared herself the police'd say. Burgled a house? Okay, where's the burglar? Hiding inside an old man's skin? Who'd believe that? Who'd believe an old old man was ever a boy of twelve? What else is the score? Did a lightningrod salesman disappear? Sure, and left his bag. But he could've left town - '

'That dwarf in the sideshow - '

'I saw him, you saw him, looks kinda like the lightningrod man, sure, but again, can you prove he was ever big? No, just like you can't prove Cooger was ever small, so that leaves us right here, Will, on the sidewalk, no proof except what we saw, and us just kids, the carnival's word against ours, and the police had a fine time anyway there. Oh gosh, it's a mess. If only, if only there was still some way to apologize to Mr Cooger - '

'Apologize?' Will yelled. 'To a maneating crocodile? Jehoshaphat! You still don't see we can't do business with those ulmers and goffs!'

'Ulmers? Goffs?' Jim gazed upon him thoughtfully, for that was how the boys talked of the creatures who dragged and swayed and slumped through their dreams. In the bad

dreams of William, the 'ulmers' moaned and gibbered and had no faces. In the equally bad dreams of Jim, the 'goffs', his peculiar name for them, grew like monster meringuepaste mushrooms, which fed on rats which fed on spiders which fed, in turn, because they were large enough, on cats.

'Ulmers! Goffs!' said Will. 'You need a tenton safe to fall on you? Look what happened to two folks already, Mr Electrico, and that terrible crazy dwarf! All kinds of things can go wrong with people on that darn machine. We know, we seen it. Maybe they squashed the lightningrod man down that way on purpose, or maybe something went wrong. Fact is, he wound up in a wine press anyway, got run over by a steamroller carousel and's so crazy now he doesn't even know us! Ain't that enough to scare the Jesus out of you, Jim? Why, maybe even Mr Crosetti - '

'Mr Crosetti's on vacation.'

'Maybe yes, maybe no. There's his shop. There's the sign: CLOSED ON ACCOUNT OF ILLNESS. What kind of illness, Jim? He eat too much candy out at the show? He get seasick on everybody's favourite ride?'

'Cut it, Will.'

'No, sir, I won't cut it. Sure, sure, the merrygoround sounds keen. You think I like being thirteen all the time? Not me! But for criyi, Jim, face it, you don't really want to be twenty!'

What else we talked about all summer?'

'Talk, sure. But throwing yourself head first in that taffy machine and getting your bones pulled long, Jim, you wouldn't what to do with your bones then!'

'I'd know,' said Jim, in the night. 'I'd know.'

'Sure. You'd just go away and leave me here, Jim.'

'Why,' protested the other, 'I wouldn't leave you, Will. We'd be together.'

'Together? You two feet taller and going around feeling your legandarmbones? You looking down at me, Jim, and what'd we talk about, me with my pockets full of kitestring and marbles and frogeyes, and you with clean nice and empty pockets and making fun, is that what we'd talk, and you able to run faster and ditch me - '

'I'd never ditch you, Will - '

'Ditch me in a minute. Well, go on, Jim, just go on leave me because I got my pocket knife and there's nothing wrong with me sitting under a tree playing mumbletypeg while you get yourself plain crazy with the heat of all those

horses racing around, but thank God they're not racing any more - '

'And it's your fault!' cried Jim. He stopped.

Will stiffened and made fists. 'You mean I should've let young meanandterrible get old meanandterrible enough to chew our heads off? Just let him ride around and hock his spit in our eye? and maybe you with him, waving goodbye, going around again, waving so long! and all I got to do is wave back, Jim, that what you mean?'

'Sh,' said Jim. 'Like you say, it's too late. The carousel's broke - '

'And when it's fixed, they ride old horrible Cooger back, make him young enough so he can speak and remember our names, and then they come like cannibals after us, or just me, if you want to get in good with them and go tell them my name and where I live - '

'I wouldn't do that, Will.' Jim touched him.

'Oh, Jim, Jim, you do see, don't you? Everything in its time, like the preacher said only last month, everything one by one, not two by two, will you remember?'

'Everything, ' said Jim, 'in its time. . .'

And then they heard voices from the police station. In one of the rooms to the right of the entrance, a woman was talking now, and men were talking.

Will nodded to Jim and they ran quietly over to pick their way through bushes and look into the room.

There sat Miss Foley. There sat Will's father.

'I don't understand,' said Miss Foley. 'To think Will and Jim would break in my house, steal, run off - '

'You saw their faces?' asked Mr Halloway.

'When I screamed, they looked back under the light.' She's not mentioning the nephew, thought Will. And she won't, of course.

You see, Jim, he wanted to shout, it was a trap! The nephew waited for us to come prowling. He wanted to get us in so much trouble, no matter what we said to anybody, police, parents, that nobody'd listen to us about carnivals, late hours, merrygorounds, because our word'd be no good!

'I don't want to prosecute,' said Miss Foley. 'But if they are innocent, where are the boys?'

'Here!' someone cried.

'Will!' said Jim.

Too late.

For Will had jumped high and was scrambling through

the window.

'Here,' he said, simply, as he touched the floor.

27

They walked home quietly on the mooncoloured sidewalks, Mr Halloway between the boys. When they reached home, Will's father sighed.

'Jim, I don't see any reason to tear your mother to bits at this hour. If you promise to tell her this whole thing at breakfast, I'll let you off. Can you get in without waking her up?'

'Sure. Look what we got.'

'We?'

Jim nodded and took them over to fumble among the clusters of thick moss and leaves on the side of the house until they found the iron rungs they had secretly nailed and placed to make a hidden ladder up to Jim's room. Mr Halloway laughed, once, almost with pain, and a strange wild sadness shook his head.

'How long has this gone on? No, don't tell. I did it, too, your age.' He looked up the ivy toward Jim's window. 'Fun being out late, free as all hell.' He caught himself. 'You don't stay out too long - ?'

'This week was the very first time after midnight.'

Dad pondered a moment. 'Having permission would spoil everything, I suppose? It's sneaking out to the lake, the graveyard, the rail tracks, the peach orchards summer nights that counts. . . .'

'Gosh, Mr Halloway, did you once - '

'Yes. But don't let the women know I told you. Up.' He motioned. 'And don't come out again any night for the next month.'

'Yes, sir!'

Jim swung monkeywise to the stars, flashed through his window, shut it, drew the shade.

Dad looked up at the hidden rungs coming down out of the starlight to the runningfree world of sidewalks that invited the onethousandyard dash, and the high hurdles of the dark bushes, and the polevault cemetery trellises and walls. . . .

'You know what I hate most of all, Will? Not being able to run any more, like you.'

'Yes, sir,' said his son.

'Let's have it clear now,' said Dad. 'Tomorrow, go apologize to Miss Foley again. Check her lawn. We may have missed some of the - stolen property - with matches and flashlights. Then go to the Police Chief to report. You're lucky you turned yourself in. You're lucky Miss Foley won't press charges.'

'Yes, sir.'

They walked back to the side of their own house. Dad raked his hand in the ivy.

'Our place, too?'

His hand found a rung Will had nailed away among the leaves.

'Our place, too.'

He took out his tobacco pouch, filled his pipe as they stood by the ivy, the hidden rungs leading up to warm beds, safe rooms, then lit his pipe and said, 'I know you. You're not acting guilty. You didn't steal anything.'

'No.'

'Then why did you say you did, to the police?'

'Because Miss Foley - who knows why? - wants us guilty. If she says we are, we are. You saw how surprised she was to see us come in through the window? She never figured we'd confess. Well, we did. We got enough enemies without the law on us, too. I figured if we made a clean breast, they'd go easy. They did. At the same time, boy, Miss Foley's won, too, because now we're criminals. Nobody'll believe what we say.'

'I'll believe.'

'Will you?' Will searched the shadows on his father's face, saw whiteness of skin, eyeball, and hair.

'Dad, the other night, at three o'clock in the morning - '

'Three in the morning - '

He saw Dad flinch as from a cold wind, as if he smelled and knew the whole thing and simply could not move, reach out, touch and pat Will.

And he knew he could not say it. Tomorrow, yes, some other day, yes, for perhaps with the sun coming up, the tents would be gone, the freaks off over the world, leaving them alone, knowing they were scared enough not to push it, say anything, just keep their mouths shut. Maybe it would all blow over, maybe. . .maybe. . . .

'Yes, Will?' said his father, with difficulty, the pipe in his hand going dead. 'Go on.'

No, thought Will, let Jim and me be cannibalized, but

no one else. Anyone that knows gets hurt. So no one else must know. Aloud he said:

'In a couple of days, Dad, I'll tell you everything. I swear. Mom's honour.'

'Mom's honour' said Dad, at last, 'is good enough for me.'

28

The night was sweet with the dust of autumn leaves that smelled as if the fine sands of ancient Egypt were drifting to dunes beyond the town. How come, thought Will, at a time like this, I can even think of four thousand years of dust of ancient people sliding around the world, and me sad because no one notices except me and Dad here maybe, and even us not telling each other.

It was indeed a time between, one second their thoughts all brambled airedale, the next all silken slumbering cat. It was a time to go to bed, yet still they lingered reluctant as boys to give over and wander in wide circles to pillow and night thoughts. It was a time to say much but not all. It was a time after first discoveries but not last ones. It was wanting to know everything and wanting to know nothing. It was the new sweetness of men starting to talk as they must talk. It was the possible bitterness of revelation.

So while they should have gone upstairs, they could not depart this moment that promised others on not so distant nights when man and boybecomingman might almost sing. So Will at last said, carefully:

'Dad? Am I a good person?'

'I think so. I know so, yes.'

'Will - will that help when things get really rough?'

'It'll help.'

'Will it save me if I need saving? I mean, if I'm around bad people and there's no one else good around for miles, what then?'

'It'll help.'

'That's not good enough, Dad!'

'Good is no guarantee for your body. It's mainly for peace of mind - '

'But sometimes, Dad, aren't you so scared that even - '

' - the mind isn't peaceful?' His father nodded, his face uneasy.

'Dad,' said Will, his voice very faint. 'Are you a good

person?'

'To you and your mother, yes, I try. But no man's a hero to himself. I've lived with me a lifetime, Will. I know everything worth knowing about myself - '

'And, adding it all up. . .?'

'The sum? As they come and go, and I mostly sit very still and tight, yes, I'm all right.'

'Then, Dad,' asked Will, 'why aren't you happy?'

'The front lawn at let's see. . .onethirty in the morning. . .is no place to start a philosophical. . .'

'I just wanted to know is all.'

There was a long moment of silence. Dad sighed.

Dad took his arm, walked him over and sat him down on the porch steps, relit his pipe. Puffing, he said, 'All right. Your mother's asleep. She doesn't know we're out here with our tomcat talk. We can go on. Now, look, since when did you think being good meant being happy?'

'Since always.'

'Since now learn otherwise. Sometimes the man who looks happiest in town, with the biggest smile, is the one carrying the biggest load of sin. There are smiles and smiles; learn to tell the dark variety from the light. The sealbarker, the laughshouter half the time he's covering up. He's had his fun and he's guilty. And men do love sin. Will, oh how they love it, never doubt, in all shapes, sizes, colours, and smells. Times come when troughs, not tables, suit our appetites. Hear a man too loudly praising others, and look to wonder if he didn't just get up from the sty. On the other hand, that unhappy, pale, putupon man walking by, who looks all guilt and sin, why, often that's your good man with a capital G, Will. For being good is a fearful occupation; men strain at it and sometimes break in two. I've known a few. You work twice as hard to be a farmer as to be his hog. I suppose it's thinking about trying to be good makes the crack run up the wall one night. A man with high standards, too, the least hair falls on him sometimes wilts his spine. He can't let himself alone, won't lift himself off the hook if he falls just a breath from grace.

'Oh, it would be lovely if you could just be fine, act fine, not think of it all the time. But it's hard, right? with the last piece of lemon cake waiting in the icebox, middle of the night, not yours, but you he awake in a hot sweat for it, eh? Do I need tell you? Or, a hot spring day, noon, and there you are chained to your school desk and away off there goes the

river, cool and fresh over the rockfall. Boys can hear clear water like that miles away. So, minute by minute, hour by hour, a lifetime, it never ends, never stops, you got the choice this second, now this next, and the next after that, be good, be bad, that's what the dock ticks, that's what it says in the ticks. Run swim, or stay hot, run eat or lie hungry. So you stay but once stayed, Will, you know the secret, don't you? don't think of the river again. Or the cake. Because if you do, you'll go crazy. Add up all the rivers never swum in, cakes never eaten, and by the time you get my age, Will, it's a lot missed out on. But then you console yourself, thinking, the more times in, the more times possibly drowned, or choken on lemon frosting. But then, through plain dumb cowardice, I guess, maybe you hold off from too much, wait, play it safe.

'Look at me: married at thirtynine, Will thirtynine! But I was so busy wrestling myself two falls out of three, I figured I couldn't marry until I had licked myself good and forever. Too late, I found you can't wait to become perfect, you got to go out and fall down and get up with everybody else. So at last I looked up from my great selfwrestling match one night when your mother came to the library for a book, and got me, instead. And I saw then and there you take a man halfbad and a women halfbad and put their two good halves together and you got one human all good to share between. That's you, Will, for my money. And the strange thing is, son, and sad, too, though you're always racing out there on the rim of the lawn, and me on the roof using books for shingles, comparing life to libraries, I soon saw you were wiser, sooner and better, than I will ever be. . . .'

Dad's pipe was dead. He paused to tap it out and reload it.

'No, sir,' Will said.

'Yes,' said his father, 'I'd be a fool not to know I'm a fool. My one wisdom is: you're wise.'

'Funny' Will said, after a long pause. 'You've told me more, tonight, than I've told you. I'll think some more. Maybe I'll tell you everything, at breakfast. Okay?'

'I'll be ready, if you are.'

'Because. . .I want you to be happy, Dad.'

He hated the tears that sprang to his eyes.

'I'll be all right, Will.'

'Anything I could say or do to make you happy, I would.'

'Willy, William.' Dad lit his pipe again and watched the

smoke blow away in sweet dissolvings. 'Just tell me I'll live forever. That would do nicely.'

His voice, Will thought, I never noticed. It's the same colour as his hair.

'Pa,' he said, 'don't sound so sad.'

'Me? I'm the original sad man. I read a book and it makes me sad. See a film: sad. Plays? they really work me over.'

'Is there anything,' said Will, 'doesn't make you sad?'

'One thing. Death.'

'Boy!' Will started. 'I should think that would!'

'No' said the man with the voice to match his hair. 'Death makes everything else sad. But death itself only scares. If there wasn't death, all the other things wouldn't get tainted.'

And, Will thought, here comes the carnival, Death like a rattle in one hand, Life like candy in the other; shake one to scare you, offer one to make your mouth water. Here comes the sideshow, both hands full!

He jumped to his feet.

'Dad oh, listen! You'll live forever! Believe me, or you're sunk! Sure, you were sick a few years ago - but that's over. Sure, you're fiftyfour, but that's young! And another thing - '

'Yes, Willy?'

His father waited for him. He swayed. He bit his lips, then blurted out:

'Don't go near the carnival.'

'Strange,' his father said, 'that's what I was going to tell you.'

'I wouldn't go back to that place for a billion dollars!'

But, Will thought, that won't stop the carnival searching through town to visit me.

'Promise, Dad?'

'Why don't you want me to go there, Will?'

'That's one of the things I'll tell tomorrow or next week or next year. You just got to trust me, Dad.'

'I do, son.' Dad took his hand. 'It's a promise.'

As if at a signal, both turned to the house. The time was up, the hour was late, enough had been said, they properly sensed they must go.

'The way you came out,' said Dad, 'is the way you go in.'

Will walked silently to touch the iron rungs hidden

under the rustling ivy.

'Dad. You won't pull these off. . .?'

Dad probed one with his fingers.

'Some day, when you're tired of them, you'll take them off yourself.'

'I'll never be tired of them.'

'Is that how it seems? Yes, to someone your age, you figure you'll never get tired of anything. All right, son, up you go.'

He saw how his father looked up along the ivy and the hidden path.

'You want to come up this way, too?'

'No, no,' his father said, quickly.

'Because,' said Will, 'you're welcome.'

'That's all right. Go on.'

But he still looked at the ivy stirring in the dark morning light.

Will sprang up, grabbed the first, the second, the third rungs and looked down.

From just this distance, Dad looked as if he were shrinking, there on the ground. Somehow he didn't want to leave him behind there in the night, like someone ditched by someone else, one hand up to move, but not moving.

'Dad!' he whispered. 'You ain't got the stuff!'

Who says!? cried Dad's mouth, silently.

And he jumped.

And laughing without sound, the boy, the man swung up the side of the house, unceasingly, hand over hand, foot after foot.

He heard Dad slip, scrabble, grab.

Hold tight! he thought.

'Ah. . .!'

The man breathed hard.

Eyes tight, Will prayed: hold. . .there. . .now. . .!!

The old man gusted out, sucked in, swore in a fierce whisper, then climbed again.

Will opened his eyes and climbed and the rest was smooth, high, higher, fine, sweet, wondrous, done! They swung in and sat upon the sill, same size, same weight, coloured same by the stars, and sat embraced once more with grand fine exhaustion, gasping on huge ingulped laughs which swept their bones together, and for fear of waking God, country, wife, Mom, and hell, they snugclapped hands to each other's mouths, felt the vibrant warm hilarity

fountained there and sat one instant longer, eyes bright with each other and wet with love.

Then, with a last strong clasp, Dad was gone, the bedroom door shut.

Drunk on the long night's doings, lolled away from fear toward better, grander things found in Dad, Will slung off limpfalling clothes with tipsy arms and delightfully aching legs, and like a fall of timber chopped himself to bed. . . .

29

He slept for exactly one hour.

And then, as if remembering something he had only half seen, he woke, sat up, and peered out at Jim's rooftop.

'The lightningrod!' he yelled. 'It's gone!'

Which indeed it was.

Stolen? No. Jim take it down? Yes! Why? For the shucks of it. Smiling, he had climbed to scuttle the iron, dare any storm to strike his house! Afraid? No. Fear was a new electricpower suit Jim must try for size.

Jim! Will wanted to smash his confounded window. Go nail the rod back! Before morn, Jim, the blasted carnival'll send someone to find where we live, don't know how they'll come or what they'll look like, but, Lord, your roof's so empty! the clouds are moving fast, that storm's rushing at us and. . .

Will stopped.

What sort of noise does a balloon make, adrift?

None.

No, not quite. It noises itself, it soughs, like the wind billowing your curtains all white as breaths of foam. Or it makes a sound like the stars turning over in your sleep. Or it announces itself like moonrise and moonset. That last is best: like the moon sailing the universal deeps, so rides a balloon.

How do you hear it, how are you warned? The ear, does it hear? No. But the hairs on the back of your neck, and the peachfuzz in your ears, they do, and the hair along your arms sings like grasshopper legs frictioned and trembling with strange music. So you know, you feel, you are sure, lying abed, that a balloon is submerging the ocean sky.

Will sensed a stir in Jim's house; Jim, too, with his fine dark antennae, must have felt the waters part high over town to let a Leviathan pass.

Both boys felt a shadow bulk the drive between their

houses, both flung up their windows, both poked their heads out, both dropped their jaws in surprise at this friendly, this always exquisite timing, this delightful pantomime of intuition, of apprehension, their tandem teamwork over the years. Then silverfaced, for the moon was rising, both glanced up.

As a balloon wafted over and vanished.

'Holy cow, what's a balloon doing here!?' Jim asked, but wished no answer.

For, peering, they both knew the balloon was searching the best search ever; no carmotor racket, no tires whining asphalt, no footstepped street, just the wind clearing a great amazon through the clouds for a solemn voyage of wicker basket and storm sail riding over.

Neither Jim nor Will crashed his window or pulled his shade, they simply had to stay motionless waiting, for they heard the noise again like a murmur in someone else's dream.

. . .

The temperature dropped forty degrees.

Because now the stormbleached balloon whisperpurled, plummetsank softly down, its elephant shadow cooling gemmed lawns and sundials as they flaunted their swift gaze high through that shadow.

And what they saw was something akimbo and arustle in the downhung wicker carriage. Was that head and shoulders? Yes, with the moon like a silver cloak thrown up behind. Mr Dark! thought Will. The Crusher! thought Jim. The Wart! thought Will. The Skeleton! The Lava Sipper! The Hanging Man! Monsieur Guillotine!

No.

The Dust Witch.

The Witch who might draw skulls and bones in the dust, then sneeze it away.

Jim looked to Will and Will to Jim; both read their lips: the Witch!

But why a wax crone flung out in a night balloon to search? thought Will, why none of the others, with their lizardvenom, wolffire, snakepit eyes? Why send a crumbled statue with blindnewt lashes sewn tight with blackwidow thread?

And then, looking up, they knew.

For the Witch, though peculiar wax, was peculiarly alive. Blind, yes, but she thrust down rustsplotched fingers which petted, stroked the sluices of air, which cut and

splayed the wind, peeled layers of space, blinded stars, which hovered and danced, then fixed and pointed as did her nose.

And the boys knew even more.

They knew that she was blind, but special blind. She could dip down her hands to feel the bumps of the world, touch house roofs, probe attic bins, reap dust, examine draughts that blew through halls and souls that blew through people, draughts vented from bellows to thumpwhist, to poundtemples., to pulsethroat, and back to bellows again. Just as they felt that balloon sift down like an autumn rain, so she could feel their souls disinhabit, reinhabit their tremulous nostrils. Each soul, a vast warm fingerprint, felt different, she could roll it in her hand like clay; smelled different, Will could hear her snuffing his life away; tasted different, she savoured them with her rawgummed mouth, her puffadder tongue; sounded different, she stuffed their souls in one ear, tissued them out the other!

Her hands played down the air, one for Will, one for Jim.

The balloon shadow washed them with panic, rinsed them with terror.

The Witch exhaled.

The balloon, freed of the small sour ballast, uprose. The shadow passed.

'Oh God!' said Jim. 'Now they know where we live!'

Both gasped. Some monstrous baggage brushed and dragged across the shingles of Jim's house.

'Will! She's got me!'

'No! I think - '

The drag, brush, rustle scurried from bottom to top of Jim's roof. Then Will saw the balloon whirl up, fly off toward the hills.

'She's gone, there she goes! Jim, she did something to your roof. Shove the monkey pole over!'

Jim slid the long slender clothesline pole over, Will fixed it on his sill, then swung out, hand over hand, swung until Jim pulled him through his window and they barefooted it into Jim's clothes closet and boosted and hoisted each other up inside the attic that smelled like lumber mills, old, dark, and too silent. Perched out on the high roof, shivering, Will cried: 'Jim, there it is.'

And there it was, in the moonlight.

It was a track like a snail paints on a sidewalk. It glistened It was silverslick. But this was a path left by a

gigantic snail that, if it existed at all, weighed a hundred pounds. The silver ribbon was a yard across. Starting down at the leafflued rain trough, the silver track shimmered to the rooftop, then tremored down the other side.

'Why?' gasped Jim. 'Why?'

'Easier than looking for house numbers or street names. She marked your roof so you can see it for miles around, night or day!'

'Ohmigosh.' Jim bent to touch the track. A faint evilsmelling glue covered his finger. 'Will, what'll we do?'

' I've got a hunch,' the other whispered, 'they won't be back till morning. They can't just start a rumpus. They got some plan. Right now - there's what we do!'

Coiled across the lawn below like a vast boa constrictor, waiting for them, was the garden hose.

Will was gone, down, fast, and didn't knock anything over or wake anyone up. Jim, on the roof, was surprised, in no time at all, when Will came scuttling up all panting teeth, the waterfizzing hose in his fist.

'Will, you're a genius!'

'Sure! Quick!'

They dragged the hose to drench the shingles, to wash the silver, flood the evil mercury paint away.

Working, Will glanced off at the pure colour of night turning toward morn and saw the balloon trying to make decisions on the wind. Did it sense, would it come back? Would she mark the roof again, and they have to wash it off, and she mark it and they wash it, until dawn? Yes, if need be.

If only, thought Will, I could stop the Witch for good. They don't know our names or where we live, Mr Cooger's too near dead to remember or tell. The Dwarf - if he is the lightningrod man - is mad - and, God willing, won't recollect! And they won't dare bother Miss Foley until morning. So, grinding their teeth way out in the meadows, they've sent the Dust Witch to search. . . .

'I'm a fool,' grieved Jim, quietly, rinsing the roof where the lightningrod had been. 'Why didn't I leave it up?'

'Lightning hasn't struck yet,' Will said. 'And if we jump lively, it won't. Now - over here!'

They showered the roof.

Below, someone put down a window.

'Mom.' Jim laughed, bleakly. 'She thinks it's raining.'

The rain ceased.

The roof was clean.

They let the hose snake away to thump on the night grass a thousand miles below.

Beyond town, the balloon still paused between unpromising midnight and promised and hopedfor sun.

'Why's she waiting?'

'Maybe she smells what we're up to.'

They went back down through the attic and soon were in separate rooms and beds after many fevers and chills of talk quietly separate listening to hearts and clocks beat and now lay too quickly toward dawn.

Whatever they do, thought Will, we must do it first. He wished the balloon might fly back, the Witch might guess they had washed her mark off and soar down to trace the roof again. Why?

Because.

He found himself staring at his Boy Scout archery set, the big beautiful bow and quiver of arrows arranged on the east wall of his room.

Sorry, Dad, he thought, and sat up, smiling. This time it's me out alone. I don't want her going back to report on us for hours, maybe days.

He grabbed the bow and quiver from the wall, hesitated, thinking, then stealthily ran the window up and leaned out. No need to holler loud and long, no. But just think real hard. They can't read thoughts, I know, that's sure, or they wouldn't send her, and she can't read thoughts, but she can feel body heat and special temperatures and special smells and excitements, and if I jump up and down and let her know just by my feeling good about having tricked her, maybe, maybe. . .

Four o'clock in the morning, said a drowsy clockchime, off in another land.

Witch, he thought, come back.

Witch, he thought louder and let his blood pound, the roof's clean, hear!? We made our own rain! You got to come back and remark it! Witch. . .?

And the Witch moved.

He felt the earth turn under the balloon.

Okay, Witch, come on, there's just me, the noname boy, You can't read my mind, but here's me spitting on you! and here's me yelling we tricked you, and the general idea gets

through, so come on, come on! dare! doubledare you!'

Miles away, there was a gasp of assent rising, coming near. Holy cow, he thought suddenly, I don't want her back to this house! Come on! He thrashed into his clothes.

Clutching his weapons, he aped down the hidden ivy rungs and dogged the wet grass.

Witch! Here! He ran leaving patterns, ran feeling crazy fine, wild as a hare who has chewed some secret, delicious, sweetly poisonous root that now gallops him berserk. Knees striking his chin, shoes crushing wet leaves, he soared over a hedge, his hands full of bristly porcupine weapons, fear and joy a tumble of mixed marbles in his mouth.

He looked back. The balloon swung near! It inhaled, exhaled itself along from tree to tree, from cloud to cloud.

Where am I going? he thought. Wait! The Redman house! Not lived in in years! Two blocks more.

There was the swift shush of his feet in the leaves and the big shush of the creature in the sky, while moonlight snowed everything and stars glittered.

He pulled up in front of the Redman house, a torch in each lung, tasting blood, crying out silently: here! this is my house!

He felt a great river change its bed in the sky. Good! he thought.

His hand turned the doorknob of the old house. Oh God, he thought, what if they are inside, waiting for me?

He opened a door on darkness.

Dust came and went in that dark, and a harpstring gesticulation of spiders. Nothing else.

Will jumped two at a time up the crumbling stairs, around and out on the roof where he stashed his weapons behind the chimney and stood tall.

The balloon, green as slime, printed with titan pictures of winged scorpions, ancient phoenixes, smokes, fires, clouded weathers, swung its wicker basket wheezing, down.

Witch, he thought, here!

The dank shadow struck him like a batwing.

Will toppled. He flung up his hands. The shadow was almost black flesh, striking.

He fell. He clutched the chimney.

The shadow draped him, hushing down.

It was cold as a sea cave in that clouddark.

But suddenly the wind, of itself, veered.

The Witch hissed in frustration. The balloon swam a

washing circle up around.

The wind! thought the boy wildy, it's on my side!

No, don't go! he thought. Come back.

For he feared she had smelled his plan.

She had. She itched for his scheme. She snuffed, she gasped at it. He saw the way her nails filed and scraped the air as if running over grooved wax to seek patterns. She turned her Palms out and down as ff he were a small stove burning softly somewhere in a nether world and she came to warm her hands at him. As the basket swung in an upglided pendulum he saw her squinched blindsewn eyes, the ears with moss in them, the pale wrinkled apricot mouth mummifying the air it drew in, trying to taste what was wrong with his act, his thought. He was too good, too rare, too fine, too available to be true! surely she knew that!

And knowing it, she held her breath.

Which made the balloon suspend itself, half between inhale and exhale.

Now, tremulously, experimentally, daring to test, the Witch inhaled. The balloon, so weighted, sank. Exhaled - so freed of vapour - the craft ascended!

Now, now, the waiting, the holding of dank sour breath in the wry tissues of her childlike body.

Will waggled his fingers, thumb to nose.

She sucked air. The weight of this one breath skimmed the balloon down.

Closer! he thought.

But, careful, she circled her craft, scenting the sharp adrenalin wafted from his pores. He wheeled, following as the balloon spun, and him reeling. You!. he thought, you want me sick! Spin me, will you? Make me dizzy?

There was one last thing to try.

He stood very still with his back to the balloon.

Witch, he thought, you can't resist.

He felt the sound of the green slime cloud, the kept bag of sour air, the squeal and stir of mousewicker on wicker as the shadow cooled his legs, his spine, his neck.

Close!

The Witch took air, weight, night burden, starandcoldwind ballast.

Closer!

Elephant shadow stroked his ears.

He nudged his weapons.

The shadow engulfed him.

A spider flicked his hair - her hand?

Choking a scream, he spun.

The Witch, leaned out, was a mere foot away.

He bent. He snatched.

The Witch tried to scream out breath when she smelled, felt, knew what he held tight.

But, in reaction, horrified, she seized a breath, sucked weight, burdened the balloon. It dragged the roof.

Will pulled the bowstring back, freighted with single destruction.

The bow broke in two pieces. He stared at the unshot arrow in his hands.

The Witch let out her breath in one great sigh of relief and triumph.

The balloon swung up. It struck him with its dry rattlechuckling heavyladen basket.

The Witch shouted again with insane happiness.

Clutched to the basket rim, Will with one free hand drew back and with all his strength threw the arrowhead flint up at the balloon flesh.

The Witch gagged. She tore at his face.

Then the arrow, a long hour it seemed in flight, razored a small vent in the balloon. Rapidly the shaft sank as if cutting a vast green cheese. The surface slit itself further in a wide ripping smile across the entire surface of the gigantic pear, as the blind Witch gabbled, moaned, blistered her lips, shrieked in protest, and Will hung fast, hands gripped to wicker, kicking legs, as the balloon wailed whiffled, guzzled, mourned its own swift gaseous death, as dungeon air raved out, as dragon breath gushed forth and the bag, thus driven, retreated up.

Will let go. Space whistled about him. He turned, hit shingles, fell skidding down the inclined ancient roof, over down to rim, to rainspout where, feet first, he spilled into further emptiness, yelling, clawed at the rain gutter, held, felt it groan, give way, as he swept the sky to see the balloon whistling, wrinkling, flying up like a wounded beast to evacuate its terrified exhalations in the clouds; a gunshot mammoth, not wanting to expire, yet in terrible flux coughing out its stinking winds.

All this in a flash. Then Will flailed into space, with no time to be glad for a tree beneath when it netted him, cut him, but broke his fall with mattress twig, branch and limb. Like a kite he was held face up to the moon where, at his

exhausted leisure, he might hear the last Witch lamentations for a wake in progress as the balloon spiralled her away from house, street, town with inhuman mourns.

The balloon smile, the balloon rip was allencompassing now as it wandered in deliriums to die in the meadows from which it had come, sinking down now beyond all the sleeping, ignorant and unknowing houses.

For a long while Will could not move. Buoyed in the tree branches, afraid he might slip through and kill himself on the black earth below, he waited for the sledgehammer to subside in his head.

The blows of his heart might jar him loose, crash him down but he was glad to hear them, know himself alive.

But then at last, gone calm, he gathered his limbs, most carefully searched for a prayer, and climbed himself down through the tree.

31

Nothing much else happened, all the rest of that night.

32

At dawn, a juggernaut of thunder wheeled over the stony heavens in a sparkthrowing tumult. Rain fell softly on town cupolas, chuckled from rainspouts, and spoke in strange subterranean tongues beneath the windows where Jim and Will knew fitful dreams, slipping out of one, trying another for size, but finding all cut from the same dark, mouldered cloth.

In the rustling drumbeat, a second thing occurred:

From the sodden carnival grounds, the carousel suddenly spasmed to life. Its calliope fluted up malodorous steams of music.

Perhaps only one person in town heard and guessed that the carousel was working again.

The door to Miss Foley's house opened and shut; her footsteps hurried away along the street.

Then the rain fell hard as lightning did a crippled dance down the nowtotallyrevealed, nowvanishingforever land.

In Jim's house, in Will's house, as the rain nuzzled the breakfast windows, there was a lot of quiet talk, some shouting, and more quiet talk again.

At ninefifteen, Jim shuffled out into the Sunday weather, wearing his raincoat, cap, and rubbers.

He stood gazing at his roof where the giant snail track was washed away. Then he stared at Will's door to make it open. It did. Will emerged. Ms father's voice followed: 'Want me to come along?' Will shook his head, firmly.

The boys walked solemnly, the sky washing them toward the police station where they would talk, to Miss Foley's where they would apologize again, but right now they only walked, hands in pockets, thinking of yesterday's fearful puzzles. At last Jim broke the silence:

'Last night, after we washed off the roof, and I finally got to sleep, I dreamed a funeral. It came right down Main Street, like a visit.'

'Or. . .a parade?'

'That's it! A thousand people, all dressed in black coats, black hats, black shoes, and a coffin forty feet long!'

'Criminentry!'

'Right! What forty feet long needs to be buried? I thought. And in the dream I ran up and looked in. Don't laugh.'

'I don't feel funny, Jim.'

'In the long coffin was a big long wrinkled thing like a prune or a big grape lying in the sun. Like a big skin or a giant's head, drying.'

'The balloon!'

'Hey.' Jim stopped. 'You must've had the same dream! But. . .balloons can't die, can they?'

Will was silent.

'And you don't have funerals for them, do you?'

'Jim, I. . .

'Darn balloon laid out like a hippo someone leaked the wind out of - '

'Jim, last night. . .'

'Black plumes waving, band banging on black velvetmuffled drums with black ivory bones, boy, boy! Then on top of it, have to get up this morning and tell Mom, not everything, but enough so she cried and yelled and cried some more, women sure like to cry, don't they? and called me her criminal son but - we didn't do anything bad, did we, Will?'

'Someone almost took a ride on a merrygoround.'

Jim walked along in the rain. 'I don't think I want any more of that.'

'You don't think! ? After all this!? Good grief, let me tell you! The Witch, Jim, the balloon! Last night, all alone, I - '

But there was no time to tell it.

No time to tell his stabbing the balloon so it gusted away to die in the lonely country sinking the blind woman with it.

No time because walking in the cold rain now, they heard a sad sound.

They were passing an empty lot deep within which stood a vast oaktree. Under it were rainy shadows, and the sound.

'Jim,' said Will, 'someone's - crying.'

'No.' Jim moved on.

'There's a little girl in there.'

'No.' Jim would not look. 'What would a girl be doing out under a tree in the rain? Come on.'

'Jim! You hear her!'

'No! I don't, I don't!'

But then the crying came stronger across the dead grass, flew like a sad bird through the rain, and Jim had to turn, for there was Will marching across the rubble.

'Jim - that voice - I know it!'

'Will, don't go there!'

And Jim did not move, but Will stumbled and walked until he entered the shade of the raining tree where the sky fell and was lost in autumn leaves and crept down at last in shining rivers along the branches and trunk and there was the little girl, crouched, face buried in her hands, weeping as if the town were gone and the people in it and herself lost in terrible woods.

And at last Jim came edging up and stood at the edge of the shadow and said, 'Who is it?'

'I don't know.' But Will felt tears start to his eyes, as if some part of him guessed.

'It's not Jenny Holdridge, is it. . .'

'No.'

'Jane Franklin?'

'No.' His mouth felt full of novocaine, his tongue merely stirred in his numb lips. '. . .no. . . '

The little girl wept, feeling them near, but not looking up yet.

'. . .me. . .me. . .help me. . .nobody'll help me. . .me. . .me. . .I don't like this. . .'

Then when she had strength enough and was quieter

she turned her face, her eyes almost swollen shut with weeping. She was shocked to see anyone near, then surprised.

'Jim! Will! Oh God, it's you!'

She seized Jim's hand. He writhed back, yelling. "No! I don't know you, let go!'

'Will, help me, Jim, oh don't go, don't leave!' she gasped, brokenly, new tears bursting from her eyes.

'No, no, don't!' screamed Jim, he thrashed, he broke free fell, leaped to his feet, one fist raised to strike. He stopped, trembling, held it to his side. 'Oh, Will, Will, let's get out of here, I'm sorry, oh God, God.'

The little girl in the shadow of the tree, flung back, widened her eyes to fix the two in wetness, moaned, clutched herself and rocked back and forth, her own childbaby, comforting her elbows. . . soon she might sing to herself and sing that way, alone beneath the dark tree, forever, no one able to join or stop the song.

'. . .someone must help me. . .someone must help her. . .' she mourned as for one dead, 'someone must help her. . .nobody will. . .nobody has. . .help her if not me. . .terrible. . .terrible. . .'

'She knows us!' said Will, hopelessly, half bent down to her, half turned to Jim. 'I can't leave her!'

'Lies!' said Jim, wildly. 'Lies! She don't know us! Never saw her before!'

'She's gone, bring her back, she's gone, bring her back,' mourned the girl, eyes shut.

'Find who?' Will got down on one knee, dared to touch her hand. She grabbed him. Almost immediately she knew this was wrong for he tried to tear free, so she let him go, and wept, while he waited near and Jim, far out in the dead grass, called in for them to go, he didn't like it, they must, they must go.

'Oh, she's lost,' sobbed the little girl. 'She ran off in that place and never come back. Will you find her, please, please. . .?'

Shivering, Will touched her cheek. 'Hey now,' he whispered. 'You'll be okay. I'll find help,' he said, gently. She opened her eyes. 'This is Will Halloway, okay? Cross my heart, we'll be back. Ten minutes. But you mustn't go away.' She shook her head. 'You'll wait here under the tree for us?' She nodded, mutely. He stood up. This simple motion frightened her and she flinched. So he waited and looked at

her and said, 'I know who you are.' He saw the great familiar eyes open grey in the small wounded face. He saw the long rainwashed black hair and the pale cheeks. 'I know who you are. But I got to check.'

'Who'll believe?' she wailed.

'I believe,' Will said.

And she lay back against the tree, her hands in her lap, trembling, very thin, very white, very lost, very small.

'Can I go now?' he said.

She nodded.

And he walked away.

At the edge of the lot, Jim stomped his feet in disbelief, almost hysterical with outrage and declamation.

"It can't be!'

'It is,' said Will. 'The eyes. That's how you tell. Like it was with Mr Cooger and the evil boy - There's one way to be sure. Come on!'

And he took Jim through the town and they stopped at last in front of Miss Foley's house and looked at the unlit windows in the morning gloom and walked up the steps and rang the bell, once, twice, three times.

Silence.

Very slowly, the front door moved whining back on its hinges.

'Miss Foley?' Jim called, softly.

Somewhere off in the house, shadows of rain moved on far windowpanes.

'Miss Foley. . .?'

They stood in the hall by the beadrain in the entry door, listening to the great attic beams ashift and astir in the downpour.

'Miss Foley!' Louder.

But only the mice in the walls, warmly nested, made sgraffito sounds in answer.

'She's gone out to shop,' said. Jim.

'No.' said Will. 'We know where she is.'

'Miss Foley, I know you're here!' shouted Jim suddenly, savagely, dashing upstairs. 'Come on out, you!'

Will waited for him to search and drag slowly back down. As Jim reached the bottom of the steps, they both heard the music blowing through the front door with the smell of fresh rain and ancient grass.

The carousel calliope, among the hills, piping the 'Funeral March' backwards.

Jim opened the door wider and stood in the music, as one stands in the rain.

'The merrygoround. They fixed it!'

Will nodded. 'She must've heard the music, gone out at sunrise. Something went wrong. Maybe the carousel wasn't fixed right. Maybe accidents happen all the time. Like to the lightningrod man, him insideout and crazy. Maybe the carnival likes accidents, gets a kick out of them. Or maybe they did something to her on purpose. Maybe they wanted to know more about us, our names, where we live, or wanted her to help them hurt us. Who knows what? Maybe she got suspicious or scared. Then they just gave her more than she ever wanted or asked for.'

'I don't understand - '

But now, in the doorway, in the cold rain, there was time to think of Miss Foley afraid of mirror mazes, Miss Foley alone not so long ago at the carnival, and maybe screaming when they did what they finally did to her, around and around, around and around, too many years, more years than she had ever dreamed of shucked away, rubbing her raw, leaving her naked small, alone, and bewildered because unknowneventoherself, around and around, until all the years were gone and the carousel rocked to a halt like a roulette wheel, and nothing gained and all lost and nowhere for her to go, no way to tell the strangeness, and nothing to do but weep under a tree, alone, in the autumn rain. . . .

Will thought this. Jim thought it, and said:

'Oh, the poor. . .the poor. . .'

'We got to help her, Jim. Who else would believe? If she tells anyone, “I'm Miss Foley!” “Get away!” they'd say, “Miss Foley's left town, disappeared!” “Go on, little girl!” Oh, Jim, I bet she'd pounded a dozen doors this morning wanting help, scared people with her screaming and yelling, then ran off, gave up, and hid under that tree. Police are probably looking for her now, but so what? it's just a wild girl crying and they'll lock her away and she'll go crazy. That carnival, boy, do they know how to punish so you can't hit back. They just shake you up and change you so no one ever knows you again and let you run free, it's okay, go ahead, talk, 'cause folks are too scared of you to listen. Only we hear, Jim, only you and me, and right now I feel like I just ate a cold snail raw.'

They looked back a last time at the shadows of rain crying on the windows inside the parlour where a teacher

had often served them cookies and hot chocolate and waved to them from the window and moved tall through the town. Then they stepped out and shut the door and ran back toward the empty lot.

'We got to hide her, until we can help - '

'Help?' panted Jim. 'We can't help ourselves!

'There's got to be weapons, right in front of us, we're just too blind - '

They stopped.

Beyond the thump of their own hearts, a greater heart thumped. Brass trumpets wailed. Trombones blared. A herd of tubas made an elephant charge, alarmed for unknown reasons.

'The carnival!' gasped Jim. 'We never thought! It can come right into town. A Parade! Or that funeral I dreamt about, for the balloon?'

'Not a funeral and only what looks like a parade but's a search for us, Jim, for us, or Miss Foley, if they want her back! They can march down any old street, fine and dandy, and spy as they go, drum and bugle! Jim, we got to get her before they - '

And breaking off, they flung themselves down an alley, but stopped suddenly, and leaped to hide in some bushes.

At the far end of the alley, the carnival band, animal wagons, clowns, freaks and all, banged and crashed between them and the empty lot and the great oak tree.

It must have taken five minutes for the parade to pass. The rain seemed to move on away, the clouds moving with them. The rain ceased. The strut of drums faded. The boys loped down the alley, across the street, and stopped by the empty lot.

There was no little girl under the tree.

They circled it, looked up in it, not daring to call a name.

Then very much afraid, they ran to hide themselves somewhere in the town.

33

The phone rang.

Mr Halloway picked it up.

'Dad, this is Willy, we can't go to the police station, we may not be home today, tell Mom, tell Jim's mom.'

'Willy, where are you?'

'We got to hide. They're looking for us.'

'Who, for God's sake?'

'I don't want you in it, Dad. You got to believe, we'll just hide one day, two, until they go away. If we came home they'd follow and hurt you or Ma or Jim's mom. I got to go.'

'Willy, don't!'

'Oh, Dad,' said Will. 'Wish me luck.'

Click.

Mr Halloway looked out at the trees, the houses, the streets, hearing faraway music.

'Willy,' he said to the dead phone. 'Luck.'

And he put on his coat and hat and went out into the strange bright rainy sunshine that filled the cold air.

34

In front of the United Cigar Store on this beforenoon Sunday with the bells of all churches ringing across here, colliding with each other there, showering sound from the sky now that the rain was spent, in front of the cigar store the Cherokee wooden Indian stood, his carved plumes pearled with water, oblivious to Catholic or Baptist bells, oblivious to the steadily approaching sunbright cymbals, the thumping pagan heart of the carnival band. The flourished drums, the oldwomanish shriek of calliope, the shadow drift of creatures far stranger than he, did not witch the Indian's yellow hawkfierce gaze. Still, the drums did tilt churches and plummet forth mobs of boys curious and eager for any change mild or wild, so, as the church bells stopped up their silver and iron rain, pewstiffened crowds became relaxed parade crowds as the carnival, a promotion of brass, a flush of velvet, all lionpacing, mammothshuffling, flagfluttered by.

The shadow of the Indian's wooden tomahawk lay on an iron grille embedded in the sidewalk in front of the cigar store. Over this grille with faint metallic reverberations, year after year, people passed, dropping tonnages of mintgum wrapper, gold cigarband, matchstub, cigarette butt or copper penny which vanished below forever.

Now, with the parade, hundreds of feet rang and clustered on the grille as the carnival strode by on stilts, roared by in tiger and volcano sounds and colours.

Under the grille, two shapes trembled.

'Above, like a great baroque peacock striding the bricks and asphalt, the freaks' eyes opened out, to stare, to search

office roofs, church spires, read dentists' and opticians' signs, check dime and dry goods stores as drums shocked plate glass windows and wax dummies quaked in facsimiles of fear. A multitude of hot and incredibly bright fierce eyes, the parade moved, desiring, but not quenching its desire.

For the things it most wanted were hidden in dark.

Jim and Will, under the cigar store sidewalk grille.

Crouchpressed knee to knee, heads up, eyes alert, they sucked their breaths like iron Popsicles. Above, women's dresses flowered in a cold breeze. Above, men tilted on the sky. The band, in a collision of cymbals, knocked children against their mothers' knees with concussion.

'There!' exclaimed Jim! 'The parade! It's right out front the cigar store! What're we doing here, Will? Let's go!'

'No!' cried Will, hoarsely, clenching Jim's knee. 'It's the most obvious place, in front of everybody! They'll never think to check here! Shut up!'

Thrrrummmmm. . .

The grille, above, rang with the touch of a man's shoe, and the worn nails in that shoe.

Dad! Will almost cried.

He rose, sank back, biting his lips.

Jim saw the man above wheel this way, wheel that, searching, so near, yet so far, three feet away.

I could just reach up. . .thought Will.

But Dad, pale, nervous, hurried on.

And Will felt his soul fall over cold and whitejelly quivering inside.

Bang!

The boys jerked.

A chewed lump of pink bubblegum, falling, had hit a pile of old paper near Jim's foot.

A fiveyearold boy, above, crouched on the grille, peered down with dismay after his vanished sweet.

Get! thought Will.

The boy knelt, hands to the grille.

Go on! thought Will.

He had a crazy wish to grab the gum and stuff it back up into the little boy's mouth.

A paradedrum thumped one huge time, then - silence.

Jim and Will glanced at each other.

The parade, both thought, it's halted!

The small boy stuck one hand half through the grille.

Above, in the street, Mr Dark, the Illustrated Man,

glanced back over his river of freaks, cages, at the sunburst tubas and python brass horns. He nodded.

The parade fell apart.

The freaks hurried half to one sidewalk, half to the other, mingling with the crowd, passing out handbills, eyes firecrystal, quick, striking like snakes.

The small boy's shadow cooled Will's cheek.

The parade's over, he thought, now the search begins.

'Look, Ma!' The small boy pointed down through the grille 'There!'

35

In Ned's Night Spot, half a block from the cigar store, Charles Halloway, exhausted from no sleep, too much thinking, far too much walking, finished his second coffee and was about to pay when the sharp silence from the street outside made him uneasy. He sensed rather than saw the mild intermingled disturbance as the parade melted among the sidewalk crowds. Not knowing why, Charles Halloway put his money away.

'Warm it up again, Ned?'

Ned was pouring coffee when the door swung wide, someone entered, and splayed his right hand lightly on the counter.

Charles Halloway stared.

The hand stared back at him.

There was a single eye tattooed on the back of each finger.

'Mom! Down there! Look!'

The boy cried, pointing through the grille.

More shadows passed and lingered.

Including - the Skeleton.

Tall as a dead tree in winter all skull, all scarecrowstilted bones, the thin man, the Skeleton, Mr Skull played his xylophone shadow upon hidden things, cold paper rubbish, warm flinching boys, below.

Go! thought Will. Go!

The plump fingers of the child gesticulated through the grille.

Go.

Mr Skull walked away.

Thank God, thought Will, then gasped, 'Oh, no!'

For the Dwarf as suddenly appeared., waddling along, a fringe of bells on his dirty shirt jingling softly, his toadshadow tucked under him, his eyes like broken splinters of brown marble now brightonthesurface mad, now deeply mournfully foreverlostandgoneburiedaway mad looking for something could not be found, a lost self somewhere, lost boys for an instant, then the lost self again, two parts of the little squashed man fought to jerk his flashing eyes here, there, around, up, down, one seeking the past, one the immediate present.

'Mama!' said the child.

The Dwarf stopped and looked at the boy no bigger than himself. Their eyes met.

Will flung himself back, tried to gum his body into the concrete. He felt Jim do the same, not moving but moving his mind, his soul, thrusting it into darkness to hide from the little drama above.

'Come on, Junior!' A woman's voice.

The boy was puffed up and away.

Too late.

For the Dwarf was looking down.

And in his eyes were the lost bits and fitful pieces of a man named Fury who had sold lightningrods how many days how many years ago in the long, the easy, the safe and wondrous time before this fright was born.

Oh, Mr Fury, thought Will, what they've done to you. Threw you under a piledriver, squashed you in a steel press, squeezed the tears and screams out of you, trapped you in a jackinabox all pressed down until there's nothing left of you, Mr Fury. . .nothing left but this. . .

Dwarf. And the Dwarf's face was less human, more machine now; in fact, a camera.

The shuttering eyes flexed, sightless, opening upon darkness. Tick. Two lenses expandedcontracted with liquid swiftness: a picturesnap of the grille.

A snap, also, of what lay beneath?

Is he staring at the metal, thought Will, or the spaces between the metal?

For a long moment, the ruinedsquashed clay doll Dwarf squatted while standing tall. His flashcamera eyes were bulged wide, perhaps still taking pictures?

Will, Jim, were not seen really at all, only their shape, their colour and size were borrowed by these dwarf camera eyes. They were clapped away in the boxBrownie skull. Later

how much later? - the picture would be developed by the wild, the tiny, the forgetful., the wandering and lost lightningrod mind. What lay under the grille would then be really seen. And after that? Revelation! Revenge! Destruction!

Clicksnaptick.

Children ran laughing by.

The Dwarfchild, drawn by their running joy, was swept along with them. Madly, he skipped off, remembered himself, and went looking for something, he knew not what.

The cloudy sun poured fight through all the sky.

The two boys, boxed in lightslotted pit, hisstled their breath softly out through gritted teeth.

Jim squeezed Will's hand, tight, tight.

Both waited for more eyes to stride along and rake the steel grille.

The blueredgreen tattooed eyes, all five of them, fell away from the counter top.

Charles Halloway, sipping his third coffee, turned slightly on the revolving stool.

The Illustrated Man was watching him.

Charles Halloway nodded.

The Illustrated Man did not nod or blink, but stared until the janitor wanted to turn away, but did not, and simply gazed as calmly as possible at the impertinent intruder.

'What'll it be?' asked the café proprietor.

'Nothing.' Mr Dark watched Will's father. 'I'm looking for two boys.'

Who isn't? Charles Halloway rose, paid, walked off. 'Thanks, Ned.' In passing, he saw the man with the tattoos hold his hands out, palms up toward Ned.

'Boys?' said Ned. 'How old?'

The door slammed.

Mr Dark watched Charles Halloway walk off outside the window.

Ned talked.

But the Illustrated Man did not hear.

Outside, Will's father moved toward the library, stopped, moved toward the courthouse, stopped, waited for some better sense to direct him, felt his pocket, missed his smokes, and turned toward the United Cigar Store.

Jim looked up, saw familiar feet, pale faces salt and

pepper hair. 'Will! Your dad! Call to him. He'll help us!' Will could not speak.

'I'll call to him!'

Will bit Jim's arm., shook his head violently, No!

Why not? mouthed Jim.

Because, said Will's lips.

Because. . .he gazed up. . .Dad looked even smaller up there than he had last night, seen from the side of the house. It would be like calling to one more boy passing. They didn't need one more boy, they needed a general, no, a major general! He tried to see Dad's face at the cigar counter window, and discover whether it looked really older, firmer, stronger, than it did last night washed with all the milk colours of the moon. But all he saw was Dad's fingers twitching nervously, his mouth working, as if he didn't dare ask his needs from Mr Tetley. . . .

'One. . .that is. . .one twentyfive cent cigar.'

'My God,' said Mr Tetley, above. 'The man's rich!'

Charles Halloway took his time removing the cellophane, waiting for some hint, some move on the part of the universe to show him where he was going, why he had come back this way for a cigar he did not really want. He thought he heard himself called, twice, glanced swiftly at the crowds, saw clowns passing with handbills, then lit the cigar he did not want from the eternal bluegas flame that burned in a small silver jet pipe on the counter, and puffing smoke, dropped the cigar band with his free hand, saw the band bounce on the metal grille, and vanish, his eyes following it farther down to where. . .

It lit at the feet of Will Halloway, his son.

Charles Halloway choked on cigar smoke.

Two shadows there, yes! And the eyes, terror gazing up out of the dark well under the street. He almost bent to seize the grate, yelling.

Instead, incredulous, he only blurted softly., with the crowd around, and the weather clearing:

'Jim? Will! What the hell's going on?'

At which moment, one hundred feet away, the Illustrated Man came out of Ned's Night Spot.

'Mr Halloway - ' said Jim.

'Come up out of there,' said Charles Halloway.

The Illustrated Man, a crowd among crowds, pivoted slowly, then walked toward the cigar store.

'Dad, we can't! Don't look at us down here!'

The Illustrated Man was some eighty feet away.

'Boys,' said Charles Halloway. 'The police - '

'Mr Halloway,' said Jim hoarsely., 'we're dead if you don't look up! The Illustrated Man, if he - '

'The what?' asked Mr Halloway.

'The man with the tattoos!'

From the café counter, five electric blueinked eyes fixed Mr Halloway's memory.

'Dad, look over at the courthouse clock, while we tell you what happened - '

Mr Halloway straightened up.

And the Illustrated Man arrived.

He stood studying Charles Halloway.

'Sir,' said the Illustrated Man.

'Elevenfifteen.' Charles Halloway judged the courthouse clock, adjusted his wrist watch, cigar in mouth. 'One minute slow.'

'Sir,' said the Illustrated Man.

Will held Jim, Jim held Will fast in the gumwrapper, tobaccolittered pit, as the four shoes rocked, shuffled, tilted above.

'Sir,' said the man named Dark, probing Charles Halloway's face for the bones there to compare to other bones in other halfsimilar people, 'the CoogerDark Combined Shows have picked two local boys, two! to be our special guests during our celebratory visit!'

'Well, I - ' Will's father tried not to glance at the sidewalk.

'These two boys - '

Will watched the toothsharp shoenails of the Illustrated Man flash, sparking the grille.

' - these boys will ride all rides see each show, shake hands with every performer, go home with magic kits, baseball bats - '

'Who,' interrupted Mr Halloway, 'are these lucky boys?'

'Two selected from photos snapped on our midway yesterday. Identify them, sir, and you will share their fortune. There are the boys!'

He sees us down here! thought Will. Oh, God!

The Illustrated Man thrust out his hands.

Will's father lurched.

Tattooed in bright blue ink, Will's face gazed up at him from the palm of the right hand.

Inksewn to the left palm, Jim's face was indelible and

natural as life.

'You know them?' The Illustrated Man saw Mr Halloway's throat clench, his eyelids squinch, his bones struck vibrant as from a sledgehammer blow. 'Their names?'

Dad, careful! Will thought.

'I don't - ' said Will's father.

'You know them.'

The Illustrated Man's hands shook, held out to view, asking for the gift of names, making Jim's face on the flesh, Will's face on the flesh., Jim's face hidden beneath the street, Will's face hidden beneath the street, tremble, writhe, pinch.

'Sir, you wouldn't want them to lose out. . .?'

'No, but - '

'But, but, but?' Mr Dark loomed closer, magnificent in his picturegallery flesh, his eyes, the eyes of all his beasts and hapless creatures cutting through his shirt, coat, trousers, fastening the old man tight, biting him with fire, fixing him with thousandfold attentions. Mr Dark shoved his two palms near. "But? - '

Mr Halloway needing something to excruciate, bit his cigar.

'I thought for a moment - '

'Thought what?' Grand delight from Mr Dark.

'One of them looked like - '

'Like who?'

Too eager, thought Will. You see that, Dad, don't you?

'Mister,' said Will's father. 'Why are you so jumpy about two boys?'

'Jumpy. . .?'

Mr Dark's smile melted like cotton candy.

Jim scootched himself down into a dwarf, Will crammed himself down into a midget, both looking up, waiting.

'Sir,' said Mr Dark, 'is my enthusiasm that to you? “Jumpy?”'

Will's father noted the muscles cord along the arms, roping and unroping themselves with a writhe like the puff adders and sidewinders doubtless inked and venomous there.

'One of those pictures,' drawled Mr Halloway, looks like Milton Blumquist.'

Mr Dark clenched a fist.

A blinding ache struck Jim's head.

'The other,' Will's father was almost bland, 'looks like Avery Johnson.'

Oh, Dad, thought Will, you're great!

The Illustrated Man clenched his other fist.

Will his head in a vice, almost screamed.

'Both boys,' finished Mr Halloway, 'moved to Milwaukee some weeks ago.'

'You,' said Mr Dark, coldly, 'lie.'

Will's father was truly shocked.

'Me? And spoil the prizewinners' fun?'

'Fact is,' said Mr Dark, 'we found the names of the boys ten minutes ago. Just want to doublecheck.'

'So?' said Will's father, disbelieving.

'Jim,' said Mr Dark. 'Will.'

Jim writhed in the dark. Will sank his head deep in his shoulder blades, eyes tight.

Will's father's face was a pond into which the two dark stone names sank without a ripple.

'First names? Jim? Will? Lots of Jims and Wills, couple hundred, town like this.'

Will, crouched and squirming, thought, who told? Miss Foley? But she was gone, her house empty and full of rain shadows. Only one other person. . .

The little girl who looked like Miss Foley weeping under the tree? The little girl who frightened us so bad? he wondered. In the last half hour the parade, going by, found her, and her crying for hours, afraid, and ready to do anything, say anything, if only with music, horses plunging, world racing, they would grow her old again, grow her around again, lift her, shut up her crying, stop up the awful thing and make her as she was. Did the carnival promise, lie to her when they found her under the tree and ran her off ? The little girl crying, but not telling all, because -

'Jim. Will,' said Will's father. 'First names. What about the last?'

Mr Dark did not know the last names.

His universe of monsters sweated phosphorus on his hide, soured his armpits, reeked, slammed between his ironsinewed legs.

'Now,' said Will's father, with a strange, and to him almostdefightfulbecausenew, calm, 'I think you're lying. You don't know the last names. Now, why should you, a carnival stranger, lie to me here on a street in some town on the backside of nowhere?'

The Illustrated Man clenched his two calligraphic fists very hard.

Will's father, his face pale, considered these mean, constricted fingers, knuckles' digging nails, inside which two boys faces, crushed hard in dark vice, tight, very tight in prison flesh, were kept in fury.

Two shadows, below, thrashed in agony.

The Illustrated Man erased his face to serenity.

But a bright drop fell from his right fist.

A bright drop fell from his left fist.

The drops vanished through the steel sidewalk grille.

Will gasped. Wetness had struck his face. He clapped his hand to it, then looked at his palm.

The wetness that had hit his cheek was bright red.

He glanced from it to Jim, who lay still now also, for the scarification, real or imagined, seemed over and both flicked their eyes up to where the Illustrated Man's shoes flintsparked the grille, grinding steel on steel.

Will's father saw the blood ooze from the clenched fists, but forced himself to look only at the Illustrated Man's face, as he said:

'Sorry I can't be more help.'

Beyond the Illustrated Man, rounding the corner, hands weaving the air, dressed 'm harlequin Gypsy colours, face waxen, eyes hid behind plumdark glasses, the Fortune Teller, the Dust Witch, came mumbling.

A moment later, looking up, Will saw her. Not dead! he thought. Carried off, bruised, fallen, yes but now back, and mad! Lord, yes, mad, looking especially for me!

Will's father saw her. His blood slowed, by instinct alone, to a pudding in his chest.

The crowd opened happily, laughing and commenting on her bright if tattered costume, trying to remember what she rhymed, so as to tell it later. She moved, fingers feeling the town as if it were an immensely complicated and lush tapestry. And she sang:

'Tell you your husbands. Tell you your wives. Tell you your fortunes. Tell you your lives. See me, I know. See me at the show. Tell you the colour of his eyes. Tell you the colour of her lies. Tell you the colour of his goal. Tell you the colour of her soul. Come now, don't go. See me, see me at the show.'

Children appalled, children impressed, parents delighted, parents in high good humour, and still the Gypsy from the dusts of living sang. Time walked in her murmuring. She made and broke microscopic webs between her fingers wherewith to feel soot fly up, breath fly out. She touched the

wings of flies, the souls of invisible bacteria, all specks, mites, and micasnowings of sunlight filtrated with motion and much more hidden emotion.

Will and Jim cracked their bones, cowered down., hearing:

'Blind, yes, blind. But I see what I see, I see where I be,' said the Witch, softly. 'There's a man with a straw hat in autumn. Hello. And - why there's Mr Dark, and. . .an old man. . .an old man.'

He's not that old! cried Will to himself, blinking up at the three, as the Witch stopped, her shadow falling moistfrog cool on the hidden boys.

'. . .old man. . . '

Mr Halloway was jolted as by a series of cold knives thrust in his stomach.

'. . .old man. . .old man. . .' said the Witch.

She stopped this. 'Ah. . .' The hairs in her nostrils bristled.

She gaped her mouth to savour air. 'Ah. . .'

The Illustrated Man quickened.

'Wait. . .!' sighed the Gypsy.

Her fingernails scraped down an unseen blackboard of air.

Will felt himself yip, bark, whimper like an aggravated hound.

Slowly her fingers climbed down, feeling the spectrums, weighing the light. In another moment, a forefinger might thrust to the sidewalk grille, implying: there! there!

Dad! thought Will. Do something!

The Illustrated Man, gone sweetly patient now that his blind but immensely aware dust lady was here, watched her with love.

'Now. . .' The Witch's fingers itched.

'Now!' said Will's father, loud.

The Witch flinched.

'Now, this is a fine cigar!' yelled Will's father, turning with great pomp back to the counter.

'Quiet. . .' said the Illustrated Man.

The boys looked up.

'Now - ' The Witch sniffed the wind.

'Got to light it again!' Mr Halloway stuck the cigar in the eternal blue flame.

'Silence. . .' suggested Mr Dark.

'Ever smoke, yourself?' asked Dad.

The Witch, from the concussion of his fiercely erupted and overly jovial words, dropped one wounded hand to her side, wiped sweat from it, as one wipes an antenna for better reception, and drifted it up again, her nostrils flared with wind.

'Ah!' Will's father blew a dense cloud of cigar smoke. It made a fine thick cumulus surrounding the woman.

'Gah!' she choked.

'Fool!' The Illustrated Man barked, but whether at man or woman, the boys below could not tell.

'Here, let's buy you one!' Mr Halloway blew more smoke, handing Mr Dark a cigar.

The Witch exploded a sneeze, recoiled, staggered away. The Illustrated Man snatched Dad's arm, saw that he had gone too far, let go, and could only follow his Gypsy woman off, in some clumsy and totally unexpected defeat. But then in going, he heard Will's father say, 'A fine day to you, sir!'

No, Dad! thought Will.

The Illustrated Man came back.

'Your name, sir?' he asked, directly.

Don't tell him! thought Will.

Will's father debated a moment, took the cigar from his mouth, tapped ash and said, quietly:

'Halloway. Work in the library. Drop by some time.'

'You can be sure, Mr Halloway. I will.'

The Witch was waiting near the corner.

Mr Halloway whetted his forefinger, tested the wind, and sent a cumulus her way.

She flailed back, gone.

The Illustrated Man went rigid, spun about, and strode off, the ink portraits of Jim and Will crushed hard iron tight in his fists.

Silence.

It was so quiet under the grille, Mr Halloway thought the two boys had died of fright.

And Will, below, gazing up, eyes wet, mouth wide, thought, Oh my gosh, why didn't I see it before?

Dad's tall. Dad's very tall indeed.

Still Charles Halloway did not look down at the grille but only at the small comets of splashed red colour left on the sidewalk, trailed around the corner, dropped from the clenched hands of the vanished Mr Dark. He was also gazing with surprise at himself, accepting the surprise, the new

purpose, which was half despair, half serenity, now that the incredible deed was done. Let no one ask why he had given his true name; even he could not assay and give its real weight. Now he could only read the numerals on the courthouse clock and speak to it, while the boys below, listened.

'Oh, Jim, Will, something is going on. Can you hide, keep out from under, the rest of the day? We got to have time. With things like this, where do you begin? No law's been broken, none on the books, anyway. But I feel dead and buried a month. My flesh ripples. Hide, Jim, Will, hide. I'll tell your mothers you've got jobs at the carnival, good excuse for you not coming home. Stay hid until dark, then come to the library at seven. Meantime, I'll check police records on carnivals, newspaper files at the library, books, old folios, everything that might fit. God willing, by the time you show up, after dark, I'll have a plan. Walk easy until then. Bless you, Jim. Bless you, Will.'

The small father who was very tall now walked slowly away.

Its cigar, unnoticed, fell from his hand, dropped in a spark shower through the grate.

It lay in the square pit glowing its single fiery pink eye at Jim and Will, who looked back and at last snatched to blind and put it out.

36

The, Dwarf, bearing his demented and wildly lighted eyes, made his way south on Main Street.

Stopping suddenly, he developed a film strip in his head, scanned it, bleated and blundered back through the forest of legs to reach for and pull the Illustrated Man down where a whisper was as good as a shout. Mr Dark listened, then fled, leaving the Dwarf far behind.

Reaching the cigar store Indian, the Illustrated Man sank to his knees. Clutching the steel latticegrille, he peered down in the pit.

Below lay yellow newspapers, wilted candy wrappers, burnt cigars, and gum.

Mr Dark's cry was muffled fury.

'Lose something?'

Mr Tetley blinked over his counter.

'The Illustrated Man clenched the grate, nodding once.

'I clean under the grate once a month for the money,' said Mr Tetley. 'How much you lose? Dime? Quarter? Half dollar?'

Bing!

The Illustrated Man glared up.

In the cashregister window a small firered sign jumped high:

NO SALE.

37

The town clock struck seven.

The echoes of the great chime wandered in the unlit halls of the library.

An autumn leaf, very crisp, fell somewhere in the dark. But it was only the page of a book, turning.

Off in one of the catacombs, bent to a table under a grassgreenshaded lamp, lips pursed, eyes narrowed, sat Charles Halloway, his hands trembling the pages, lifting, rearranging the books. Now and then he hurried off to peer into the autumn night, watchful of the streets. Then again he came back to paperclip pages, to inset papers, to scribble out quotations, whispering to himself. His voice brought forth quick echoes from the library vaults:

'Look here!'

'. . .here. . .!' said the night passages.

'This picture. . .!'

'. . .picture. . .!' said the halls.

'And this!'

'. . .this. . .' The dust settled.

It had been the longest day of all the days he could remember in his life. He had mingled with strange and notsostrange crowds, he had searched after the searchers, in the wake of the widescattering parade. He had resisted telling Jim's mother, Will's mother, more than they needed to know for a happy Sunday, and meantime crossed shadows with Dwarf, traded nods with Pinhead and Fireeater, kept free of shadowed alleys, and controlled his panic, when, doubling back, he saw the basement pit empty under the cigar store grille and knew that the boys were at hideandseek somewhere nearby or somewhere, praise God, very far away.

Then, in the crowds, he moved to the carnival ground, stayed out of tents, stayed free of rides, observed, watched the sun go down, and just at twilight, surveyed the cold glass

waters of the Mirror Maze and saw just enough on the shore to pull him back before he drowned. Wet all over, cold to the bone, before night caught him he let the crowd protect, warm, and bear him away up into town, to the library, and to most important books which he arranged in a great literary clock on a table, like someone learning to tell a new time. So he paced round and round the huge clock squinting at the yellowed pages as if they were mothwings pinned dead to the wood.

Here lay a portrait of the Prince of Darkness. Next a series of fantastic sketches of the Temptations of St Anthony. Next some etchings from the Bizarie by Giovanbatista Bracelli, depicting a set of curious toys, humanlike robots engaged in various alchemical rites. At five minutes to twelve stood a copy of Dr Faustus, at two lay on Occult Iconography, at six, under Mr Halloway's trailed fingers now, a history of circuses, carnivals, shadow shows, puppet menageries inhabited by mountebanks, minstrels, stiltwalking sorcerers and their fantoccini. More: A Manual of the Air Kingdoms (Things That Fly Down History). At nine sharp: By Demons Possessed, lying atop Egyptian Philtres, lying atop the Torments of the Damned, which in turn crushed flat The Spell of Mirrors. Very late up the literary clock one named Locomotives and Trains, The Mystery of Sleep, Between Midnight and Dawn, The Witches' Sabbath, and Pacts With Demons. It was all laid out. He could see the face.

But there were no hands on this clock.

He could not tell what hour of the night of life it was for himself, the boys, or the unknowing town.

For, in sum, what had he to go by?

A threeo'-clockinthemorning arrival, a grotesquelooking glass maze, a Sunday parade, a tall man with a swarm of electricblue pictures itching on his sweaty hide, a few drops of blood falling down through a pavement grille, two frightened boys staring up out of the earth, and himself, alone in mausoleum quiet, nudging the puzzle together.

What was there about the boys that made him believe the simplest word they whispered up through the grille? Fear itself was proof here, and he had seen enough fear in his fife to know it, like the smell from a butcher's shop in summer twilight.

What was there about the illustrated carnival owner's silences that spoke thousands of violent, corrupt, and

crippling words?

What was there in that old man he had seen through a tent flap late this afternoon, seated in a chair with the words MR ELECTRICO bannered over him, power webbing and crawling on his flesh like green lizards?

All, all, all of it. And now, these books. This. He touched Physiognomonie. The secrets of the individual's character as found in his face.

Were Jim and Will, then, featured all angelic, pure, halfinnocent, peering up through the sidewalk at marching terror? Did the boys represent the ideal for your Woman, Man, or Child of Excellent Bearing, Colour, Balance, and Summer Disposition?

Conversely. . .Charles Halloway turned a page. . .did the scurrying freaks, the Illustrated Marvel, bear the foreheads of the Irascible, the Cruel, the Covetous, the mouths of the Lewd and Untruthful? the teeth of the Crafty, the Unstable, the Audacious, the Vainglorious, and your Murderous Beast?

No. The book slipped shut. If faces were judged, the freaks were no worse than many he'd seen slipping from the library late nights in his long career.

There was only one thing sure.

Two lines of Shakespeare said it. He should write them in the middle of the clock of books, to fix the heart of his apprehension:

By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes.

So vague, yet so immense.

He did not want to live with it.

Yet he knew that, during this night, unless he lived with it very well, he might have to live with it all the rest of his life.

At the window he looked out and thought, Jim, Will, are you coming? will you get here?

Waiting, his flesh took paleness from his bones.

38

The library, then, at sevenfifteen, seventhirty, sevenfortyfive of a Sunday night, cloistered with great drifts of silence and transfixed avalanche of books poised like the

cuneiform stones of eternity on shelves, so high the unseen snows of time fell all year there.

Outside, the town breathed back and forth to the carnival, hundreds of people passing near where Jim and Will lay strewn in bushes to one side of the library, now ducking up, now ducking down to nose raw earth.

'Cheezit!'

Both smothered in grass. Across the street there passed what could have been a boy, could have been a dwarf, could have been a boywithdwarfmind, could have been anything blown along like the scuttlecrab leaves on the frostmica sidewalks. But then whatever it was went away Jim sat up, Will still lay face buried in good safe dirt.

'Come on, what's wrong?'

'The library,' said Will. 'I'm even afraid of it, now.' All the books, he thought, perched there, hundreds of years old, peeling skin, leaning on each other like ten million vultures. Walk along the dark stacks and all the gold titles shine their eyes at you. Between old carnival, old library and his own father, everything old. . .well. . .

'I know Dad's in there, but is it Dad? I mean what if they came, changed him, made him bad, promised him something they can't give but he thinks they can, and we go in there and some day fifty years from now someone opens a book in there and you and me drop out, like two dry mothwings on the floor, Jim, someone pressed and hid us between pages, and no one ever guessed where we went - '

This was too much for Jim, who had to do something to flog his spirits. Next thing Will knew, Jim was hammering on the library door. Both hammered, frantic to jump from this night to that warmer bookbreathing night inside. Given a choice of darkness, this one was the better: the oven smell of books, as the door opened and Dad stood with his ghostcoloured hair.

They tiptoed back through the deserted corridors, Will feeling a crazy urge to whistle as he often did past the graveyard at sundown, Dad asking what made them late, and they trying to remember all the places they hid in one day.

They had hid in old garages, they had hid in old barns, they had hid in the highest trees they could climb and got bored and boredom was worse than fear so they came down and reported in to the Police Chief and had a fine chat which gave them twenty safe minutes right in the station and Will got the idea of touring churches and they climbed all the

steeples in town and scared pigeons off the belfries and whether or not it was safer in churches and especially up with the bells or not, no one could claim, but it felt safe. But there again they began to get starchy with boredom and fatigued with sameness, and were almost on the point of giving themselves up to the carnival in order to have something to do, when quite fortunately the sun went down. From sundown to now it had taken a wonderful time, creeping upon the library, as if it were a once friendly fort that might now be manned by Arabs.

'So here we are,' whispered Jim, and stopped.

'Why am I whispering? It's after hours. Heck!'

He laughed, then stopped.

For he thought he heard a soft tread off in the subterranean vaults.

But it was only his laughter walking back through the deep stacks on panther feet.

So when they talked again, it was still in whispers. Deep forests, dark caves, dim churches, halflit libraries were all the same, they tuned you down, they dampened your ardour, they brought you to murmurs and soft cries for fear of raising up phantom twins of your voice which might haunt corridors long after your passage.

They reached the small room and circled the table on which Charles Halloway had laid out the books, where he had read many hours, and for the first time looked in each other's faces and saw a dreadful paleness, so did not comment.

'From the beginning.' Will's father pulled out chairs.

'Please.'

So, each taking his part, in their own good time, the boys told of the wanderingby lightningrod salesman, the predictions of storms to come, the longaftermidnight train, the suddenly inhabited meadow, the moonblown tents, the untouched but fullwept calliope, then the light of noon showering over an ordinary midway with hundreds of Christians wandering through but no lions for them to be tossed to, only the maze where time lost itself backward and forward in waterfall mirrors, only the OUT OF ORDER carousel, the dead supper hour, Mr Cooger, and the boy with the eyes that had seen all the glistery tripes of the world shaped like hunganddripping sins and all the sins tenterhooked and running red and verminous, this boy with the eyes of a man who has lived forever, seen too much,

might like, to die but doesn't know how. . . .

The boys stopped for breath.

Miss Foley, the carnival again, the carousel run wild, the ancient Cooger mummy gasping moonlight, exhaling silver dust, dead, then resurrected in a chair where green lightning struck his skeleton alight, all of it a storm minus rain, minus thunder, and parade, the cigar store basement, the hiding, and at last them here, finished, done with the telling.

For a long moment, Will's father sat staring blindly into the centre of the table. Then, his lips moved.

'Jim. Will,' he said. 'I believe.'

The boys sank in their chairs.

'All of it?'

'All.'

Will wiped his eyes. 'Boy,' he said gruffly. 'I'm going to start bawling.'

'We got no time for that! ' said Jim.

'No time.' And Will's father stood up, stuffed his pipe with tobacco, rummaged his pockets for matches, brought out a battered harmonica, a penknife, a cigarette lighter that wouldn't work, and a memo pad he had always meant to write some great thoughts down on but never got around to, and lined up these weapons for a pygmy war that could be lost before it even started. Probing this idle refuse, shaking his head, he finally found a tattered matchbox, lit his pipe and began to muse, pacing the room.

'Looks like we're going to do a lot of talking about one particular carnival. Where's it come from, where's it going, what's it up to? We thought it never hit town before. Yet, by God, look here.'

He tapped a yellowed newspaper ad dated October 12, 1888, and ran his fingernail along under this:

J. C. COOGER AND G. M. DARK PRESENT THE PANDEMONIUM THEATRE CO. COMBINED SIDESHOWS AND UNNATURAL MUSEUMS, INTERNATIONAL!

'J.C. G.M.' said Jim. 'Those are the same initials as on the throwaways around town this week. But - it couldn't be the same men. . . .'

'No?' Will's father rubbed his elbows. 'My goose pimples run counter to that.'

He laid forth other old newspapers.

'1860. 1846. Same ad. Same names. Same initials. Dark and Cooger, Cooger and Dark, they came and went, but only

once every twenty, thirty, forty years, so people forgot. Where were they all the other years? Travelling. And more than travelling. Always in October: October 1846, October 1860, October 1888, October 1910, and October now, tonight.' His voice trailed off. '. . .Beware the autumn people. . . .'

'What?'

'An old religious tract. Pastor Newgate Phillips, I think. Read it as a boy. How does it go again?'

He tried to remember. He licked his lips. He did remember.

"'For some, autumn comes early, stays late through life where October follows September and November touches October and then instead of December and Christ's birth, there is no Bethlehem Star, no rejoicing, but September comes again and old October and so on down the years, with no winter, spring, or revivifying summer. For these beings, fall is the ever normal season, the only weather, there be no choice beyond. Where do they come from? The dust. Where do they go? The grave. Does blood stir their veins? No: the night wind. What ticks in their head? The worm. What speaks from their mouth? The toad. What sees from their eye? The snake. What hears with their ear? The abyss between the stars. They sift the human storm for souls, eat flesh of reason, fill tombs with sinners. They frenzy forth. In gusts they beetlescurry, creep, thread, filter, motion, make all moons sullen, and surely cloud all clearrun waters. The spiderweb hears them, trembles - breaks. Such are the autumn people. Beware of them."'

After a pause, both boys exhaled at once.

'The autumn people,' said Jim. 'That's them. Sure!'

'Then - ' Will swallowed - 'does that make us. . .summer people?'

'Not quite.' Charles Halloway shook his head. 'Oh, you're nearer summer than me. If I was ever a rare fine summer person, that's long ago. Most of us are halfandhalf. The August noon in us works to stave off the November chills. We survive by what little Fourth of July wits we've stashed away. But there are times when we're all autumn people.'

'Not you,' Dad.

'Not you, Mr Halloway!'

He turned quickly to see both appraising him, paleness next to paleness, hands on knees as if to bolt.

'It's a way of speaking. Easy, boys, I'm after the facts. Will, do you really know your Dad? Shouldn't you know me, and me you, if it's going to be us'ns against them'ns?'

'Hey, yeah,' breathed Jim. 'Who are you?'

'We know who he is, darn it!' Will protested.

'Do we?' said Will's father. 'Let's see. Charles William Halloway. Nothing extraordinary about me except I'm fiftyfour, which is always extraordinary to the man inside it. Born in Sweet Water, lived in Chicago, survived in New York, brooded in Detroit, floundered in lots of places, arrived here late, after living in libraries around the country all those years because I liked being alone, liked matching up in books what I'd seen on the roads. Then in the middle of all the running away, which I called travel, in my thirtyninth year, your mother fixed me with one glance, been here ever since. Still most comfortable in the library nights, in out of the rain of people. Is this my last stop? Chances are. Why am I here at all? Right now, it seems, to help you.'

He paused and looked at the two boys and their fine young faces.

'Yes,' he said. 'Very late in the game. To help you.'

39

Every nightblind library window clattered with cold.

The man, the two boys, waited for the wind to pass away.

Then Will said: 'Dad. You've always helped.'

'Thanks, but it's not true.' Charles Halloway examined one very empty hand. 'I'm a fool. Always looking over your shoulder to see what's coming instead of right at you to see what's here. But then, for what salve it gives me, every man's a fool. Which means you got to pitch in all your life, bail out, board over, tie rope, patch plaster, pat cheeks, kiss brows, laugh, cry, make do, against the day you're the worst fool of all and shout “Help!” Then all you need is one person's answer. I see it so clear, across the country tonight lie cities, towns and mere jerkwater stops of fools. So the carnival steams by, shakes any tree: it rains jackasses. Separate jackasses, I should say, individuals with no one, they think, or no one actual, to answer their “Help!” Unconnected fools, that's the harvest the carnival comes smiling after with its threshing machine.'

'Oh gosh,' said Will. 'It's hopeless!'

'No. The very fact we're here worrying about the difference between summer and autumn, makes me sure there's a way out. You don't have to stay foolish and you don't have to be wrong, evil, sinful, whatever you want to call it. There's more than three or four choices. They, that Dark fellow and his friends, don't hold all the cards, I could tell that today, at the cigar store. I'm afraid of him but, I could see, he as was afraid of me. So there's fear on both sides. Now how can we use it to advantage?'

'How?'

'First things first. Let's bone up on history. If men had wanted to stay bad forever, they could have, agreed? Agreed. Did we stay out in the fields with the beasts? No. In the water with the barracuda? No. Somewhere we let go of the hot gorilla's paw. Somewhere we turned in our carnivore's teeth and started chewing blades of grass. We been working mulch as much as blood, into our philosophy, for quite a few lifetimes. Since then we measure ourselves up the scale from apes, but not half so high as angels. It was a nice new idea and we were afraid we'd lose it, so we put it on paper and built buildings like this one around it. And we been going in and out of these buildings chewing it over, that one new sweet blade of grass, trying to figure how it all started, when we made the move, when we decided to be different. I suppose one night hundreds of thousands of years ago in a cave by a night, fire when one of those shaggy men wakened to gaze over the banked coals at his woman, his children, and thought of their being cold, dead, gone forever. Then he must have wept. And he put out his hand in the night to the woman who must die some day and to the children who must follow her. And for a little bit next morning, he treated them somewhat better, for he saw that they, like himself, had the seed of night in them. He felt that seed like slime in his pulse, splitting, making more against the day they would multiply his body into darkness. So that man, the first one, knew what we know now: our hour is short, eternity is long. With this knowledge came pity and mercy, so we spared others for the later, more intricate, more mysterious benefits of love.

'So, in sum, what are we? We are the creatures that know and know too much. That leaves us with such a burden again we have no choice, to laugh or cry. No other animal does either. We do both, depending on the season and the need. Somehow, I feel the carnival watches, to see which we're doing and how and why, and moves in on us when it

feels we're ripe.

Charles Halloway stopped, for the boys were watching him so intently he suddenly had to turn, flushing, away.

'Boy, Mr Halloway,' cried Jim, softly. 'That's great. Go on.'

'Dad,' said Will, amazed. 'I never knew you could talk.'

'You should hear me here late nights, nothing but talk! Charles Halloway shook his head. 'Yes, you should've heard. I should've said more to you any day you name in the past. Hell. Where was I? Leading up to love, I think. Yes. . .love.'

Will looked bored, Jim looked wary of the word.

And these looks gave Charles Halloway pause.

What could he say that might make sense to them? Could he say love was above all, common cause, shared experience?

That was the vital cement, wasn't it? Could he say how he felt about their all being here tonight on this wild world running around a big sun which fell through a bigger space falling through yet vaster immensities of space, maybe toward and maybe away from Something? Could he say: we share this billonmileanhour ride. We have common cause against the night. You start with little common causes. Why love the boy in a March field with his kite braving the sky? Because our fingers burn with the hot string singeing our hands. Why love some girl viewed from a train, bent to a country well? The tongue remembers iron water cool on some long lost noon. Why weep at strangers dead by the road? They resemble friends unseen in forty years. Why laugh when clowns are hit by pies? We taste custard, we taste life. Why love the woman who is your wife? Her nose breathes in the air of a world that I know; therefore I love that nose. Her ears hear music I might sing half the night through; therefore I love her ears. Her eyes delight in seasons of the land; and so I love those eyes. Her tongue knows quince, peach, chokeberry, mint and lime; I love to hear it speaking. Because her flesh knows heat, cold, affliction, I know fire, snow and pain. Shared and once again shared experience. Billions of prickling textures. Cut one sense away, cut part of life away. Cut two senses; life halves itself on the instant. We love what we know, we love what we are. Common cause, common cause, common cause of mouth, eye, ear, tongue, hand, nose, flesh, heart, and soul.

But. . .how to say it?

'Look,' he tried, 'put two men in a rail car, one a

soldier, the other a farmer. One talks war, the other wheat; and bore each other to sleep. But let one spell longdistance running, and if the other once ran the mile, why, those men will run all night like boys, sparking a friendship up from memory. So, all men have one business in common: women, and can talk that till sunrise and beyond. Hell.'

Charles Halloway stopped, flushed, selfconscious again, knowing vaguely there was a target up ahead but not quite how to get there. He chewed his lips.

Dad, don't stop, thought Will. When you talk, it's swell in here. You'll save us. Go on.

The man read his son's eyes, saw the same look in Jim, and walked slowly around the table, touching a night beast here, a clutch of ragged crones there, a star, a crescent moon, an antique sun, an hourglass that told time with bone dust instead of sand.

'Have I said anything I started out to say about being good? God, I don't know. A stranger is shot in the street, you hardly move to help. But if, half an hour before, you spent just ten minutes with the fellow and knew a little about him and his family, you might just jump in front of his killer and try to stop it. Really knowing is good. Not knowing, or refusing to know, is bad, or amoral, at least. You can't act if you don't know. Acting without knowing takes you right off the cliff. God, God, you must think I'm crazy, this talk. Probably think we should be out duckshooting, elephantgunning balloons, like you did, Will, but we got to know all there is to know about those freaks and that man heading them up. We can't be good unless we know what bad is, and it's a shame we're working against time. Show'll close and the crowds go home early on a Sunday night. I feel we'll have a visit from the autumn people, then. That gives us maybe two hours.'

Jim was at the window now, looking out across the town to the far black tents and the calliope that played by the turning of the world in the night.

'Is it bad?' he asked.

'Bad?' cried Will, angrily. 'Bad. You ask that!?'

'Calmly,' said Will's father. 'A good question. Part of that show looks just great. But the old saying really applies: you can't get something for nothing. Fact is, from them, you get nothing for something. They make you empty promises, you stick our your neck and - wham!'

'Where'd they come from?' asked Jim. 'Who are they?'

Will went to the window with his father and they both looked out and Charles Halloway said, to those far tents:

'Maybe once it was just one man walking across Europe, jingling his ankle bells, a lute on his shoulder making a hunchbacked shadow, before Columbus. Maybe a man walked around in a monkey skin a million years ago, stuffing himself with other people's unhappiness, chewed their pain all day like spearmint gum, for the sweet savour., and trotted faster, revivified by personal disaster. Maybe this son after him refined his father's deadfalls, mantraps, bonecrunchers, headachers, fleshtwitchers, soulskinners. These laid the scum on lonely ponds from which came vinegar gnats to snuff up noses, mosquitoes to ride summernight flesh and sting forth those bumps that carnival phrenologists dearly love to fondle and prophesy upon. So from one man here, one man there, walking as swift as his oily glances, it became scuttles of dogmen begging gifts of trouble, pandering misery, seeking under carpets for centipede treads, watchful of night sweats, harkening by all bedroom doors to hear men twist basting themselves with remorse and warmwater dreams.

'The stuff of nightmare is their plain bread. They butter it with pain. They set their clocks by deathwatch beetles, and thrive the centuries. They were the men with the leatherribbon whips who sweated up the Pyramids seasoning it with other people's salt and other people's cracked hearts. They coursed Europe on the White Horse of the Plague. They whispered to Caesar that he was mortal, then sold daggers at halfprice in the grand March sale. Some must have been lazing clowns, foot props for emperors, princes, and epileptic popes. Then out on the road, Gypsies in time, their populations grew as the world grew, spread, and there was more delicious variety of pain to thrive on. The train put wheels under them and here they run down the long road out of the Gothic and Baroque; look at their wagons and coaches, the carving like medieval shrines, all of it stuff once drawn by horses, mules, or, maybe, men.'

'All those years.' Jim's voice swallowed itself. The same people? You think Mr Cooger, Mr Dark are both a couple hundred years old?'

'Riding that merrygoround they can shave off a year or two, any time they want, right?'

'Why, then - ' The abyss opened at Will's feet - 'they could live forever!'

'And hurt people.' Jim turned it over, again and again.

'But why, why all the hurt?'

'Because,' said Mr Halloway. 'You need fuel, gas, something to run a carnival on, don't you? Women live off gossip, and what's gossip but a swap of headaches, sour spit, arthritic bones, ruptured and mended flesh, indiscretions, storms of madness, calms after the storms? If some people didn't have something juicy to chew on, their choppers would prolapse, their souls with them. Multiply their pleasure at funerals, their chuckling through breakfast, obituaries, add all the catfight marriages where folks spend careers ripping skin off each other and patching it back upside around, add quack doctors slicing persons to read their guts like tea leaves, then sewing them tight with fingerprinted thread., square the whole dynamite factory by ten quadrillion, and you got the black candlepower of this one carnival.

'All the meannesses we harbour, they borrow in redoubled spades. They're a billion times itchier for pain, sorrow, and sickness than the average man. We salt our lives with other people's sins. Our flesh to us tastes sweet. But the carnival doesn't care if it stinks by moonlight instead of sun, so long as it gorges on fear and pain. That's the fuel, the vapour that spins the carousel, the raw stuffs of terror, the excruciating agony of guilt, the screams from real or imagined wounds. The carnival sucks that gas, ignites it, and chugs along its way.'

Charles Halloway took a breath, shut his eyes, and said:

'How do I know this? I don't! I feel it. I taste it. It was like old leaves burning on the wind two nights ago. It was a smell like mortuary flowers. I hear that music. I hear what you tell me, and half what you don't tell me. Maybe I've always dreamt about such carnivals, and was just waiting for it to come sols to see it once, and nod. Now, that tent show plays my bones like a marimba.

'My skeleton knows.

'It tells me.

'I tell you.'

40

“Can they . . .” said Jim. “I mean . . . do they . . . buy souls?”

“Buy, when they can get them free?” said Mr. Halloway. "Why, most men jump at the chance to give up

everything for nothing. There's nothing we're so slapstick with as our own immortal souls. Besides, you're inferring that's the, Devil out there. I only say it's a type of creature has learned to live off souls, not the souls themselves. That always worried me in the old myths. I asked myself, why would Mephistopheles want a soul? What does he do with it when he gets it, of what use is it? Stand back while I throw my own theory over the plate. Those creatures want the gas off souls who can't sleep nights, that fever by day from old crimes. A dead soul is no kindling. But a live and raving soul, crippled with selfdamnation, oh that's a pretty snoutful for such as them.

"How do I know this? I observe. The carnival is like people, only more so. A man, a woman, rather than walk away from, or kill, each other, ride each other a lifetime, pulling hair, extracting fingernails, the pain of each to the other like a narcotic that makes existence worth the day. So the carnival feels ulcerated egos miles off and lopes to toast its hands at that ache. It smells boys ulcerating to be men, paining like great unwise wisdom teeth, twenty thousand miles away, summer abed in winter's night. It feels the aggravation of middleaged men like myself, who gibber after longlost August afternoons to no avail. Need, want, desire, we burn those in our fluids, oxidize those in our souls, which jet streams out lips, nostrils, eyes, cars, broadcasts from antennaefingers, long or short wave, God only knows, but the freakmasters perceive Itches and come crabclustering to Scratch. It's traveled a long way on an easy map, with people handy by every crossroad to lend it lustful pints of agony to power it on. So maybe the carnival survives, living off the poison of the sins we do each other, and the ferment of our most terrible regrets."

Charles Halloway snorted.

"Good grief, how much have I said out loud, how much to myself, the last ten minutes?"

"You," said Jim, "talk a lot."

"In what language, dammit!" cried Charles Halloway, for suddenly it seemed he had done no more than other nights walking exquisitely alone, deliciously propounding his ideas to halls which echoed them once, then made them vanish forever. He had written books a lifetime, on the, airs of vast rooms in vast buildings, and had it all fly out the vents. Now it all seemed fireworks, done for color, sound, the high architecture of words, to dazzle the boys, powder his

ego, but with no mark left on retina or mind after the color and sound faded; a mere exercise in selfdeclamation. Sheepishly he accosted himself.

"How much of all this got through? One sentence out of five, two out of eight?"

"Three in a thousand,"' said Will.

Charles Halloway could not but laugh and sigh in one.

Then Jim cut across with:

"Is . . . is it . . . Death?"

"The carnival?" The old man lit his pipe, blew smoke, seriously studied the patterns. "No. But I think it uses Death as a threat. Death doesn't exist. It never did, it never will. But we've drawn so many pictures of it, so many years, trying to pin it down, comprehend it, we've got to thinking of it as an entity, strangely alive and greedy. All it is, however, is a stopped watch, a loss, an end, a darkness. Nothing. And the carnival wisely knows we're more afraid of Nothing than we are of Something. You can fight Something. But . . . Nothing? Where do you hit it? Has it a heart, soul, buttbehind, brain? No, no. So the carnival just shakes a great croupier's cupful of Nothing at us, and reaps us as we tumble back headoverheels in fright. Oh, it shows us Something that might eventually lead to Nothing, all right. That flourish of mirrors out there in the meadow, that's a raw Something, for sure. Enough to knock your soul sidewise in the saddle. It's a hit below the belt to see yourself ninety years gone, the vapors of eternity rising from you like breath off dry ice. Then, when it's frozen you stiff, it plays that fine sweet soulsearching music that smells of freshwashed frocks of women dancing on backyard lines in May, that sounds like haystacks trampled into wine, all that blue sky and summer nightonthelake kind of tune until your head bangs with the drums that look like full moons beating around the calliope. Simplicity. Lord, I do admire their direct approach. Hit an old man with mirrors, watch his pieces fall in jigsaws of ice only the carnival can put together again. How? Waltz around back on the carousel to 'Beautiful Ohio' or 'Merry Widow.' But they're careful not to tell one thing to people who go riding to its music."

"What?" asked Jim.

"Why, that if you're a miserable sinner in one shape, you're a miserable sinner in another. Changing size doesn't change the brain. If I made you twentyfive tomorrow, Jim, your thoughts would still be boy thoughts, and it'd show! Or

if they turned me into a boy of ten this instant, my brain would still be fifty and that boy would act funnier and older and weirder than any boy ever. Then, too, time's out of joint another way."

"Which way?" asked Will.

"If I became young again, all my friends would still be fifty, sixty, wouldn't they? I'd be cut off from them, forever, for I couldn't tell them what I'd up and done, could I? They'd resent it. They'd hate me. Their interests would no longer be mine, would they? Especially their worries. Sickness and death for them, new life for me. So where's the place in this world for a man who looks twenty but who is older than Methuselah, what man could stand the shock of a change like that? Carnival won't warn you its equal to postoperative shock, but, by God, I bet it is, and more!

"So, what happens? You get your reward: madness. Change of body, change of personal environment, for one thing. Guilt, for another, guilt at leaving your wife, husband, friends to die the way all men dieLord, that alone would give a man fits. So more fear, more agony for the carnival to breakfast on. So with the green vapors coming off your stricken conscience you say you want to go back the way you were! The carnival nods and listens. Yes, they promise, if you behave as they say, in a short while they'll give you back your twoscore and ten or whatever. On the promise alone of being returned to normal old age, that train travels with the world, its side show populated with madmen waiting to be released from bondage, meantime servicing the carnival, giving it coke for its ovens."

Will murmured something.

"What?"

"Mss Foley," mourned Will. "'Oh, poor Miss Foley, they got her now, just like you say. Once she got what she wanted it scared her, she didn't like it, oh, she was crying so hard, Dad, so hard; now I bet they promise her someday she can be fifty again if she'll mind. I wonder what they're doing with her, right now, oh, Dad, oh, Jim!"

"God help her." Will's father put a heavy hand out to trace the old carnival portraits. "They've probably thrown her in with the freaks. And what are they? Sinners who've traveled so long, hoping for deliverance, they've taken on the shape of their original sins? The Fat Man., what was he once? If I can guess the carnival's sense of irony, the way they like to weight the scales, he was once a ravener after all kinds

and varieties of lust. No matter, there he lives now, anyway, collected up in bursting skin. The Man, Skeleton, or whatever, did he starve his wife's, children's spiritual as well as physical hungers? The Dwarf? Was he or was he not your friend, the lightningrod salesman, always on the road, never settling, evermoving, facing no encounters, running ahead of the lightning and selling rods, yes, but leaving others to face the storm, so maybe, through accident, or design, when he fell in with the free rides, he shrank not to a boy but a mean ball of grotesque tripes, all selfinvolved. The fortunetelling, Gypsy Dust Witch? Maybe someone who lived always tomorrow and let today slide, like myself, and so wound up pen having to guess other people's wild sunrises and sad sunsets. You tell me, you've seen her near. The Pinhead? The Sheep Boy? The Fire Eater? The Siamese Twins, good God, what were they? twins all bound up in tandem narcissism? We'll never know. They'll never tell. We've guessed, and probably guessed wrong, on ten dozen things the last half hour. Nowsome plan. Where do we go from here?"

Charles Halloway placed forth a map of the town and drew in the location of the carnival with a blunt pencil.

"Do we keep hiding out? No. With Miss Foley, and so many others involved, we just can't. Well, then, how do we attack so we won't be picked off first thing? What kind of weapons-"

"Silver bullets." cried Will. suddenly.

"Heck, no!" snorted Jim. "They're not vampires!"

"If we were Catholic, we could borrow church holy water and-"

"Nuts," said Jim. "Movie stuff. It don't happen that way in real life. Am I wrong, Mr. Halloway?"

"I wish you were, boy."

Will's eyes glowed fiercely. "Okay. Only one thing to do: trot down to the meadow with a couple gallons of kerosene and some matches-"

"That's against the law!" Jim exclaimed.

"Look who's talking!"

'Hold on!"

But everyone stopped right then.

Whisper.

A faint tide of wind flowed up along through the library corridors and into this room.

"The front door," Jim whispered. "Someone just opened it."

Far away, a gentle click. The draft that had for a moment stirred the boys' trouser cuffs and blown the man's hair, ceased.

“Someone just closed it.”

Silence.

Just the great dark library with its labyrinths and hedgerow mazes of sleeping books.

“Someone's inside.”

The boys half rose, bleating in the backs of their mouths.

Charles Halloway waited, then said one word, softly:

“Hide.”

“We can't leave you-”

“Hide.”

The boys ran and vanished in the dark maze. Charles Halloway then rigidly, slowly, breathing in, breathing out, forced himself to sit back down, his eyes on the yellowed newspapers, to wait, to wait, then again . . . to wait some more.

41

A shadow moved among shadows.

Charles Halloway felt his soul submerge.

It took a long time for the, shadow and the man it escorted to come stand in the doorway of the room. The shadow seemed deliberate in its slowness so as to shingle his flesh and cheesegrate his steadily willed calm. And when at last the shadow reached the door it brought not one, not a hundred, but a thousand people with it to look in.

“My name is Dark,” said the voice.

Charles Halloway let out two fistfuls of air.

“Better known as the Illustrated Man,” said the voice. “Where are the boys?”

“Boys?” Will's father turned at last to appraise the tall man who stood in the door.

The Illustrated Man sniffed the yellow pollen that whiffed up from the ancient books as quite suddenly Will's father saw them laid out in full sight, leaped up, stopped, then began to close them, one by one, as casually as possible.

The Illustrated Man pretended not to notice.

“The boys are not home. The two houses are empty. What a shame, they'll miss those free rides.”

“I wish I knew where they were.”“ Charles Halloway

started carrying the books to the shelves. ”Hell, if they knew you were here with free tickets, they'd shout for joy."

“Would they?” Mr. Dark let his smile melt like a white and pink paraffin candy toy he no longer had appetite for. Softly, he said, “I could kill you.”

Charles Halloway nodded, walking slowly.

“Did you hear what I said?” barked the Illustrated Man.

“Yes.” Charles Halloway weighed the books, as if they were his judgment. “But you won't kill now. You're too smart. You've kept the show on the road a long time, being smart.”

“So you've read a few papers and think you know all about us?”

“'No, not all. Just enough to scare me.”

“Be more scared then,”' said the crowd of nightcrawling illustrations locked under black suiting, speaking through the thin lips. “One of my friends, outside, can fix you so it seems you died of most natural heart failure.”

The blood banged at Charles Halloway's heart, knocked at his temples, tapped twice at his wrists.

The Witch, he thought.

His lips must have formed the words.

“The Witch.” Mr. Dark nodded.

The other shelved the books, withholding one.

“Well, what have you there?” Mr. Dark squinted. “”A Bible? How very charming, how childish and refreshingly oldfashioned."

“Have you ever read it, Mr. Dark?”'

“'Read it! I've had every page, paragraph, and word read at me, sir!” Mr. Dark took time to light a cigarette and blow smoke toward the NO SMOKING sign, then at Will's father. “Do you really imagine that books can harm me? Is naiveté really your armor? Here!”

And before Charles Halloway could move, Mr. Dark ran lightly forward and took the Bible. He, held it in his two hands.

“Aren't you surprised? See, I touch, hold, even read from it.”

Mr. Dark blew smoke on the pages as he riffled them.

“Do you expect me to fall away into so many Dead Sea scrolls of flesh before you? Myths, unfortunately, are just that. Life, and by life I could mean so many fascinating things, goes on, makes shift for itself, survives wildly, and I not the least wild among many. Your King James and his

literary version of some rather stuffy poetic materials is worth just about this much of my time and sweat."

Mr. Dark hurled the Bible into a wastepaper basket and did not look at it again.

"I hear your heart beating rapidly," said Mr. Dark. "'My ears are not so finely tuned as the Gypsy's, but they hear. Your eyes jump beyond my shoulder. The boys hide out there in the warrens? Good. I would not wish for their escape. Not that anyone will believe their gibberings, in fact it's good advertisement for our shows, people titillate, nightsweat, then come prowling down to look us over, lick their lips, and wonder about investing in our special securities. You came, you prowled, and it wasn't just for curiosity. How old are you?"

Charles Halloway pressed his lips shut.

"Fifty?" purred Mr. Dark. "Fiftyone?" he murmured.

"Fiftytwo? Like to be younger?"

"No!"

"No need to yell. Politely, please."' Mr. Dark hummed, strolling the room, running his hand over the books as if they were years to be counted. "Oh, it's nice to be young really. Wouldn't forty be nice, again? Forty's ten years nicer than fifty, and thirty's twenty years nicer by an incredible long shot."

"I won't listen!" Charles Halloway shut his eyes.

Mr. Dark tilted his head, sucked on his cigarette, and observed. "Strange, you shut your eyes, not to listen. Clapping your hands over your ears would be better-"

Will's father clapped his hands to his ears, but the voice came through.

"Tell you what," said Mr. Dark, casually, waving his cigarette. "If you help me within fifteen seconds I'll give you your fortieth birthday. Ten seconds and you can celebrate thirtyfive. A rare young age. A stripling, almost, by comparison. I'll start counting by my watch and by God, if you should jump to it, lend a hand, I might just cut thirty years off your life! Bargains galore, as the posters say of it! Starting all over again, everything fine and new and glorious, all the things to be done and thought and savored again. Last chancel Here goes. One, Two. Three. Four-"

Charles Halloway hunched away, half crouched, propped hard against the shelves, grinding his teeth to drown the sound of counting.

"You're losing out, old man, my dear old fellow," said

Mr. Dark. “Five. Losing. Six. Losing very much. Seven. Really losing. Eight. Frittering away. Nine. Ten. My God, you fool! Eleven. Halloway! Twelve. Almost gone. Thirteen! Gone! Fourteen! Lost! Fifteen! Lost forever!”

Mr. Dark put down his arm with the watch on it.

Charles Halloway, gasping,, had turned away to bury his face in the smell of ancient books, the feel of old and comfortable leather, the taste of funeral dust and pressed flowers.

Mr. Dark stood in the door now, on his way out.

“Stay there,” he directed. “'Listen to your heart. I'll send someone to fix it. But, first, the boys . . .”

The crowd of unsleeping creatures, saddled upon tall flesh, strode quietly forth into darkness, borne with and all over upon Mr. Dark. Their cries and whines and utterances of vague but excruciating excitements sounded in his husky summoning:

“'Boys? Are you there? Wherever you are . . . answer.”

Charles Halloway sprang forward, then felt the room spin and whirl him, as that soft, that easy, that most pleasant voice of Mr. Dark went calling through the dark. Charles Halloway fell against a chair, thought: Listen, my heart! sank down to his knees, he said, Listen to my heart! it explodes! Oh God, it's tearing free!-and could not follow.

The Illustrated Man trod catsoft in the labyrinths of shelved and darkly waiting books.

“Boys . . . ? Hear me . . . ?”

Silence.

“Boys . . .?”

42

Somewhere in the recumbent solitudes, the motionless but teeming millions of books, lost in two dozen turns right, three dozen turns left, down aisles, through doors, toward dead ends, locked doors, halfempty shelves, somewhere in the literary soot of Dickens's London, or Dostoevsky's Moscow or the steppes beyond, somewhere in the vellumed dust of atlas or Geographic, sneezes pent but set like traps, the boys crouched, stood, lay sweating a cool and constant brine.

Somewhere hidden, Jim thought: He's coming!

Somewhere hidden, Will thought: He's near!

“Boys . . . ?”

Mr. Dark came carrying his panoply of friends, his

jewelcase assortment of calligraphical reptiles which lay sunning themselves at midnight on his flesh. With him strode the stitchinked Tyrannosaurus rex, which lent to his haunches a machined and ancient wellspring mineraloil glide. As the thunder lizard strode, all glassbead pomp, so strode Mr. Dark, armored with vile lightning scribbles of carnivores and sheep blasted by that thunder and arun before storms of juggernaut flesh. It was the pterodactyl kite and scythe which raised his arms almost to fly the marbled vaults. And with the inked and stencilled flashburnt shapes of pistoned or bladed doom came his usual crowd of hangerson, spectators gripped to each limb, seated on shoulder blades, peering from his jungled chest, hung upside down in microscopic millions in his armpit vaults screaming batscreams for encounters, ready for the hunt and if need be the kill. Like a black tidal wave upon a bleak shore, a dark tumult infilled with phosphorescent beauties and badly spoiled dreams, Mr. Dark sounded and hissed his feet, his legs, his body, his sharp face forward.

"Boys . . .?"

Immensely patient, that soft voice, ever the warmest friend to chilly creatures burrowed away, nested amongst dry books; so he scuttered, crept, scurried, stalked, tiptoed, wafted, stood immensely still among the primates, the Egyptian monuments to bestial gods, brushed black histories of dead Africa, stayed awhile in Asia, then sauntered on to newer lands.

"Boys, I know you hear me! The sign reads: SILFNCE! So, I'll whisper: one of you still wants what we offer. Eh? Eh?"

Jim, thought Will.

Me, thought Jim. No! oh, no! not still! not me!

"Come out." Mr. Dark purred the air through his teeth. "I guarantee rewards! Whoever turns himself in wins it all!

Bangitybang!

My heart! thought Jim

Is that me? thought Will, or Jim!!?

"I hear you." Mr. Dark's lips quivered. "Closer now. Will? Jim? Isn't it Jim who's the, smart one? Come along, boy. . . !"

No! thought Will.

I don't know anything! thought Jim, wildly.

"Jim, yes . . ." Mr. Dark wheeled in a new direction. "Jim, show me where your friend is." Softly. "We'll shut him

up, give you the ride that would have been his if he'd used his head. Right, Jim?" A dove voice, cooing. "Closer. I hear your heart jump!"

Stop! thought Will to his chest.

Stop! Jim clenched his breath. Stop!!

"I wonder . . . are you in this alcove . . . ?"

Mr. Dark let the peculiar gravity of a certain group of stacks tug him forward.

"You here, Jim . . .? Or . . . over behind . . . ?"

He shoved a trolley of books mindlessly off on rubber rollers to bump through the night. A long way off, it crashed and spilled its contents to the floor like so many dead black ravens.

"Smart hideandseekers, both," said Mr. Dark. "But someone's smarter. Did you hear the carousel calliope tonight? Did you know, someone dear to you was down to the carousel? Will? Willy? William. William Halloway. Where's your mother tonight?"

Silence.

"She was out riding the night wind, WillyWilliam. Around. We put her on. Around. We left her on. Around. You hear, Willy? Around, a year, another year, another, around, around!"

Dad! thought Will. Where are you!

In the far room, Charles Halloway, seated, his heart pounding, heard and thought, He won't find them, I won't move unless he does, he can't find them, they won't listen! they won't believe! he'll go away!

"Your mother, Will," called Mr. Dark, softly. "Around and around, can you guess which direction, Willy?"

Mr. Dark circled his thin ghost hand in the dark air between the stacks.

"Around, around, and when we let your mother off, boy, and showed her herself in the Mirror Maze, you should have heard the one single sound she made. She was like a cat with a hair ball in her so big and sticky there was no way to gag it out, no way to scream around the hair coming out her nostrils and ears and eyes, boy, and her old old old. The last we saw of her, boy Willy, she was running off away from what she saw in the mirrors. She'll bang Jim's house door but when his ma sees a thing, two hundred years old slobbering at the keyhole, begging the mercy of gunshot death, boy, Jim's ma will gag the same way, like a hairballed cat sick but can't be sick, and beat her away, send her beggaring the

streets, where no one'll believe, Will, such a kettle of bones and spit, no one'll believe this was a rose beauty, your kind relations So Will, it's up to us to run find, ran save her, for we know who she isright, Will, right, Will, right, right, right?!"

The dark man's voice hissed away to silence.

Very faintly now, somewhere in the library, someone was sobbing.

Ah . . .

The Illustrated Man gassed the air pleasantly from his dank lungs.

Yesssssssssss . . .

"Here . . ." he, murmured. "What? Filed under B for Boys? A for Adventure? H for Hidden. S for Secret. T for Terrified? Or filed under J for Jim or N for Nightshade, W for William, H for Halloway? Where are my two precious human books, so I may turn their pages, eh?,"

He kicked a place for his right foot on the first shelf of a towering stack.

He shoved his right foot in, put his weight there, and swung his left foot free.

"There."

His left foot hit the second shelf, knocked space. He climbed. His right foot kicked a hole on the third shelf, plunged books back, and so up and up he climbed, to fourth shelf, to fifth, to six, groping dark library heavens, hands clutching shelfboards, then scrabbling higher to leaf night to find boys, if boys there were, like bookmarks among books.

His right hand, a princely tarantula, garlanded with roses, cracked a book of Bayeaux tapestries aspin down the sightless abyss below. It seemed an age before the tapestries struck, all askew, a ruin of beauty, an avalanche of gold, silver, and skyblue thread on the floor.

His left hand, reaching the ninth shelf as he panted, grunted, encountered empty spaceno books.

"Boys, are you here on Everest?"

Silence. Except for the faint sobbing, nearer now.

"Is it cold here? Colder? Coldest?"'

The eyes of the Illustrated Man came abreast of the eleventh shelf.

Like a corpse laid rigid out, face down just three inches away, was Jim Nightshade.

One shelf further up in the catacomb, eyes trembling with tears, lay William Halloway.

"Well," said Mr. Dark.

He reached a hand to pat Will's head.

"Hello," he said.

43

To Will, the palm of the hand that drifted up was like a moon rising.

Upon it was the fiery blueinked portrait of himself. Jim, too, saw a hand before his face.

His own picture looked back at him from the palm.

The hand with Will's picture grabbed Will.

The hand with Jim's picture grabbed Jim.

Shrieks and yells.

The Illustrated Man heaved.

Twisting, he felljumped to the floor.

The boys, kicking, yelling, fell with him. They landed on their feet, toppled, collapsed, to be held, reared, set right, fistfuls of their shirts in Mr. Dark's fists.

"Jim!" he said. "Will! What were you doing up there, boys? Surely not reading?"

"Dad!"

"Mr. Halloway!"

Will's father stepped from the dark.

The Illustrated Man rearranged the boys tenderly under one arm like kindling, then gazed with genteel curiosity at Charles Halloway and reached for him. Will's father struck one blow before his left hand was seized, held, squeezed. As the boys watched, shouting, they saw Charles Halloway gasp and fall to one knee.

Mr. Dark squeezed that left hand harder and, doing this, slowly, certainly, pressured the boys with his other arm, crushing their ribs so air gushed from their mouths.

Night spiraled in fiery whorls like great thumbprints inside Will's eyes.

Will's father, groaning, sank to both knees, flailing his right arm.

"Damn you!"

"But," said the carnival owner quietly, "I am already."

"Damn you, damn you!"

"Not words, old man," said Mr. Dark. "'Not words in books or words you say, but real thoughts, real actions, quick thought, quick action, win the day. So!"

He gave one last mighty clench of his fist.

The boys heard Charles Halloway's finger bones crack.

He gave a last cry and fell senseless.

In one motion like a solemn pavane, the Illustrated Man rounded the stacks, the boys, kicking books from shelves, under his arms.

Will, feeling walls, books, floors fly by, foolishly thought, pressed close.. Why, why, Mr. Dark smells like . . . calliope steam!

Both boys were dropped suddenly. Before they could move or regain their breath, each was gripped by the hair on their head and roused marionetteswise to face a window, a street.

"Boys, you read Dickens?" Mr. Dark whispered.

Critics hate his coincidences. But we know, don't we? Life's all coincidence. Turn death and happenstance flakes off him like fleas from a killed ox. Look!"

Both boys writhed in the ironmaiden clutch of hungry saurians and bristly apes.

Will did not know whether to weep with joy or new despair.

Below, across the avenue, passing from church going home, was his mother and Jim's mother.

Not on the carousel, not old, crazy, dead, in jail, but freshly out in the good October air. She had been not a hundred yards away in church during all the last five minutes!

Mom! screamed Will, against the hand which, anticipating his cry, clamped tight to his mouth. .

"Mom," crooned Mr. Dark, mockingly. "Come save me!"

No, thought Will, save yourself, run!

But his mother and Jim's mother simply strolled content, from the warm church through town.

Mom! screamed Will again, and some small muffled bleat of it escaped the sweaty paw.

Will's mother, a thousand miles away over on that sidewalk, paused.

She couldn't have heard! thought Will. Yet-

She looked over at the library.

"Good," sighed Mr. Dark. "Excellent, fine."

Here! thought Will. See us, Mom! Run call the police!

"Why doesn't she look at this window?" asked Mr. Dark quietly. "And see us three standing as for a portrait. Look over. Then, come running. We'll let her in."

Will strangled a sob. No, no.

His mother's gaze trailed from the front entrance to the firstfloor windows.

"Here," said Mr. Dark. "Second floor. A proper coincidence, let's make it proper."

Now Jim's mother was talking. Both women stood together at the curb.

No, thought Will, oh, no.

And the women turned and went away into the Sundaynight town.

Will felt the Illustrated Man slump the tiniest bit.

"Not much of a coincidence, no crisis, no one lost or saved. Pity. Well!"

Dragging the boys' feet, he glided down to open the front door.

Someone waited in the shadows.

A lizard hand scurried cold on Will's chin.

"Halloway," husked the Witch's voice.

A chameleon perched on Jim's nose.

"Nightshade," whisked the drybroom voice.

Behind her stood the Dwarf and the Skeleton, silent, shifting, apprehensive.

Obedient to the occasion, the boys would have given their best stored yells air, but again, on the instant recognizing their need, the Illustrated Man trapped the sound before it could issue forth, then nodded curtly to the old dust woman.

The Witch toppled forward with her seamed black wax sewnshut iguana eyelids and her great proboscis with the nostrils caked like tobaccoblackened pipe bowls, her fingers tracing, weaving a silent plinth of symbols on the mind.

The boys stared.

Her fingernails fluttered, darted, feathered cold winterwater air. Her pickled green froes breath crawled their flesh in pimples as she sang softly, mewing, humming, glistering her babes, her boys, her friends of the slick snailtracked roof, the straightflung arrow, the stricken and skydrowned balloon.

"Darningneedle dragonfly, sew up these mouths so they not speak!"

Touch, sew, touch, sew her thumbnail stabbed, punched, drew, stabbed, punched, drew along their lower, upper lips until they were, threadpouch shut with invisible read.

"Darning needledragonfly, sew up these ears, so they

not hear!”

Cold sand funneled Will's ears, burying her voice. Muffled, far away, fading, she chanted on with a rustle, tick, tickle, tap, flourish of caliper hands.

Moss grew in Jim's ears, swiftly sealing him deep.

“Darning needledragonfly, sew up these eyes so they not see!”

Her whitehot fingerprints rolled back their stricken eyeballs to throw the lids down with bangs like great tin doors slammed shut.

Will saw a billion flashbulbs explode, then suck to darkness while the unseen darningneedle insect out beyond somewhere pranced and fizzed like insect drawn to sunwarmed honeypot, as closeted voice stitched off their senses forever and a day beyond.

“Darningneedle dragonfly, have done with eye, ear, lip and tooth, finish hem, sew dark, mound dust, heap with slumber sleep, now tie all knots ever so neat, pump silence, in blood like sand in river deep. So. So.”

The Witch, somewhere outside the boys, lowered her hands.

The boys stood silent. The Illustrated Man took his embrace from them and stepped back.

The woman from the Dust sniffed at her twin triumphs, ran her hand a last loving time over her statues.

The Dwarf toddled madly about in the boys' shadows, nibbling daintily at their fingernails, softly calling their names.

The Illustrated Man nodded toward the library. “The janitor's clock. Stop it.”

The Witch, mouth wide, savoring doom, wandered off into the marble quarry.

Mr. Dark said: “Left, right. One, two.”

The boys walked down the steps, the Dwarf at Jim's side, the Skeleton at Will's.

Serene as death, the Illustrated Man followed.

44

Somewhere near, Charles Halloway's hand lay in a whitehot furnace, melted to sheer nerve and pain. He opened his eyes. At the same moment he heard a great breath as the front door swung shut and a woman's voice came singing in the hall:

“Old man, old man, old man, old man . . . ?”

Where his left hand should be was this swelled blood pudding which pulsed with such ecstasies of pain it fed forth his life, his will, his whole attention. He tried to sit up, but the pain hammerblowed him down again “Old man . . . ?”

Not old! Fiftyfour's not old, he thought wildly.

And here she came on the worn stone floors, her mothfingers tapping, scanning braille book titles, as her nostrils siphoned the shadows.

Charles Halloway hunched and crawled, hunched and crawled, toward the nearest stack, cramming pain back with his tongue. He must climb out of reach, climb where books might be weapons flung down upon any nightcrawling pursuer. . . .

"Old man, hear you breathing. .

She on his tide, let her body be summoned by every sibilant hiss of his pain.

“Old man. feel your hurt. . . .”

If he could fling the hand, the pain, out the window where it might lie beating like a heart, summoning her away, tricked, to go seek this awful fire. Bent in the street, he imagined her brisking her palms at this throb, an abandoned chunk of delirium.

But no the hand stayed, glowed, poisoned the air, hurrying the strange nunGypsy's tread as she gasped her avaricious mouth most ardently.

“Damn you!” he cried. “Get it over with! I'm here!”

So the Witch wheeled swift as a black clothes dummy on rubber rollers and swayed over him.

He did not even look at her. Such weights and pressures of despair and exertion fought for his attention, he could only free his eyes to watch the inside of his lids upon which multiple and ever changing looms of terror jigged and gamboled.

“Very simple.” The whisper bent low. “Stop the heart!”

Why not, he thought, vaguely.

“Slow,” she murmured.

Yes, he thought.

“'Slow, very slow.”

His heart, once bolting, now fell away to a strange, ease, disquiet, then quiet, then ease.

“Much more slow, slow . . .” she suggested.

Tired, yes, you hear that, heart? he wondered.

His heart heard. Like a tight fist it began to relax, a

finger at a time.

"Stop all for good, forget all for good," she whispered.

Well why not?

"Slower . . . slowest."

His heart stumbled.

And then for no reason, save perhaps for a last look around, because he did want to get rid of the pain, and sleep was the way to do that . . . Charles Halloway opened his eyes.

He saw the Witch.

He saw her fingers working at the air, his face, his body, the heart within his body, and the soul within the heart. Her swamp breath flooded him while, with immense curiosity, he watched the poisonous drizzle from her lips, counted the folds in her stitchwrinkled eyes, the Gila monster neck, the mummylinen ears, the dryrivulet riversand brow. Never in his life had he focused so nearly to a person, as if she were a puzzle, which once touched together might show life's greatest secret. The solution was in her, it would all spring clear this moment, no, the next, no, the next, watch her scorpion fingers! hear her chant as she diddled the air, yes, diddled was it, tickling, tickling, "Slow!" she whispered. "Slow!" And his obedient heart pulled rein. Diddletickle went her fingers.

Charles Halloway snorted. Faintly, he giggled.

He caught this. Why? Why am I . . . gigling . . . at such a time!?

The Witch pulled back the merest quarter inch as if some strange but hidden electric light socket, touched with wet whorl, gave shock.

Charles Halloway saw but did not see her flinch, sensed but seemed in no way to consider her withdrawal, for almost immediately, seizing the initiative, she flung herself forward, not touching, but mutely gesticulating at his chest as one might try to spell an antique clock pendulum.

"Slow!" she cried.

Senselessly, he permitted an idiot smile to balloon itself up from somewhere to attach itself with careless ease under his nose.

"Slowest!"

Her new fever, her anxiety which changed itself to anger was even more of a toy to him. A part of his attention, secret until now, leaned forward to scan every pore of her Halloween face. Somehow, irresistibly, the prime thing was:

nothing mattered. Life in the end seemed a prank of such size you could only stand off at this end of the corridor to note its meaningless length and its quite unnecessary height, a mountain built to such ridiculous immensities you were dwarfed in its shadow and mocking of its pomp. So with death this near he thought numbly but purely upon a billion vanities, arrivals, departures, idiot excursions of boy, boyman, man and oldman goat. He had gathered and stacked all manner of foibles, devices, playthings of his egotism and now, between all the silly corridors of books, the toys of his life swayed. And none more grotesque than this thing named Witch Gypsy ReaderofDust, tickling, that's what! just tickling the air! Fool! Didn't she know what she was doing! He opened his mouth.

Of itself, like a child born of an unsuspecting parent, one single raw laugh broke free.

The Witch swooned back.

Charles Halloway did not see. He was far too busy letting the joke rush through his fingers, letting hilarity spring forth of it's own volition along his throat, eyes squeezed shut; there it flew, whipping shrapnel in all directions.

"You!" he cried, to no one, everyone, himself, her, them, it, all. "Funny! You!"

"No," the Witch protested.

"Stop tickling!" he gasped.

"Not!" she lunged back, frantically. "Not! Sleep! Slow! Very slow!"

"No tickling is all it is, for sure," he roared. "Oh, ha! Ha, stop!"

"Yes, stop heart!" she squealed. "Stop blood." Her own heart must have shaken like a tambourine; her hands shook. In midgesticulation she froze and became, aware of the silly fingers.

"Oh, my God!" He wept beautiful glad tears. "Get off my ribs, oh, ha, go on, my heart!"

"Your heart, yesssssss!"

"God!" He popped his eyes wide, gulped air, released more soap and water washing everything clear, incredibly clean. "Toys! The key sticks out your back! Who wound you up!?"

And the largest roar of all, flung at the woman, burnt her hands, seared her face, or so it seemed, for she seized herself as from a blast furnace, wrapped her fried hands in

Egyptian rags, gripped her dry dugs, skipped back, gave pause, then started a slow retreat, nudged, pushed, pummeled inch by inch, foot by foot, clattering bookracks, shelves, fumbling for handholds on volumes that thrashed free as she scrambled them down. Her brow knocked dim histories, vain theories, dunedup time, promised but compromised years. Chased, bruised, beaten by his laugh which echoed, rang, swam to fill the marble vaults, she whirled at last, claws razoring the wild air and fled to fall downstairs.

Moments later, she managed to cram herself through the front door, which slammed!

Her fall, the door slam, almost broke his frame with laughter.

"Oh God, God, please stop, stop yourself!" he begged of his hilarity.

And thus begged, his humor let be.

In midroar, at last, all faded to honest laughter, pleasant chuckling, faint giggling, then softly and with great contentment receiving and giving, breath, shaking his happyweary head, the good ache of action in his throat and ribs, gone from his crumpled hand. He lay against the stacks, head leaned to some dear befriending book, the tears of releaseful mirth salting his cheeks, and suddenly knew her gone.

Why? he wondered. What did I do?

With one last bark of mirth, he rose up, slow.

What's happened? Oh, God, let's get it clear! First, the drug store, a halfdozen aspirin to cure this hand for an hour, then, think. In the last five minutes you did win something, didn't you? What's victory taste like?

Try to remember

And smiling a new smile at the ridiculous deadanimal left hand nested in his right crooked elbow, he hurried down the night corridors, and out into town. . . .

Something Wicked This Way Comes

III

Departures

45

The small parade moved, soundless, past the eternally revolving, endingbutunending candy serpentine of Mr. Crosetti's barber pole, past all the darkening or darkened shops, the emptying streets, for people were home now from the church suppers, or out at the carnival for the last side show or the last highladder diver floating like milkweed down the night.

Will's feet, far away below, clubbed the sidewalk. One, two, he thought, someone tells me left, right. Dragonfly whispers: onetwo.

Is Jim in the parade?! Will's eyes flicked the briefest to one side. Yes! But who's the other little one? The gonemad, everything'sinterestingsotouchit, everything's redhot, pullback, Dwarf! Plus the Skeleton. And then behind, who were all those hundreds, no, thousands of people marching along, breathing down his neck?

The Illustrated Man.

Will nodded and whined so high and silently that only dogs, dogs who were no help, dogs who could not speak, might hear.

And sure enough, looking obliquely over, he saw not one, not two, but three dogs who, smelling the occasion, their own parade, now ran ahead, now fell behind, their tails like guidons for the platoon.

Bark! thought Will, like in the movies! Bark, bring the police!

But the dogs just smiled and trotted.

Coincidence, please, thought Will. Just a small one!

Mr. Tetley! Yes! Will sawbutdidnotsee Mr. Tetley! Rolling the wooden Indian back into his shop, closing for the night!

“Turn heads,” murmured the Illustrated Man.

Jim turned his head. Will turned his head.

Mr. Tetley smiled.

“Smile,” murmured Mr. Dark.

The two boys smiled.

“Hello!” said Mr. Tetley.

“Say hello,” someone whispered.

“Hello,” said Jim.

“'Hello,” said Will.

The dogs barked.

“A free ride at the carnival,” murmured Mr. Dark.

“Free ride,” said Will.

“'At the carnival!” cracked Jim.

Then, like good machines, they shut up their smiles.

“'Have fun!” called Mr. Tetley.

The dogs barked joy.

The parade marched on.

“Fun,” said Mr. Dark. “Free rides. When the crowds go home, half an hour from now. We'll ride Jim round. You still want that, Jim?”

Hearing but not hearing, locked away in himself, Will thought, Jim, don't listen!

Jim's eyes slid: wet or oily, it was hard to tell.

“You'll travel with us, Jim, and if Mr. Cooger doesn't survive (it's a near thing for him, we haven't saved him yet, we'll try again now) but if he doesn't make it, Jim, how would you like to be partners? I'll grow you to a fine strong age, eh? Twentytwo? twentyfive?'. Dark and Nightshade, Nightshade and Dark, sweet lovely names for such as we with such as the side shows to run around the world! What say, Jim?”

Jim said nothing, sewn up in the Witch's dream.

Don't listen! wailed his best friend, who heard nothing but heard it all.

“And Will?” said Mr. Dark. “Let's ride him back and back, eh? Make him a babe in arms, a babe for the Dwarf to carry like a clownchild, roundabout in parades, every day for the next fifty years, would you like that, Will? to be a babe forever? not able to talk and tell all the lovely things you know? Yes, I think that's best for Will. A plaything, a little wet friend for the Dwarf!”

Will must have screamed.

But not out loud.

For only the dogs barked, in terror; yiping, off they ran, as if pelted with rocks.

A man came around the comer.

A policeman.

“Who's this?” muttered Mr. Dark.

“Mr. Kolb,” said Jim.

“Mr. Kolb!” said Will.

“Darningneedle,” whispered Mr. Dark. “Dragonfly.” Pain stabbed Will's ears. Moss stuffed his eyes. Gum glued his teeth. He felt a multitudinous tapping, shuttling, weaving, about his face, all numb again.

“Say hello to Mr. Kolb.”

“Hello, ” said Jim.

“. . . Kolb . . .” said the dreaming Will

“Hello, boys. Gentlemen.”

“Turn here,” said Mr. Dark.

They turned.

Away toward meadow country, away from warm lights, good town, safe streets, the drumless march progressed.

46

Stretched out over, a mile of territory the straggling parade now moved as follows:

At the edge of the carnival midway, stumping the grass with their dead feet, Jim and Will paced friends who constantly retold the wondrous uses of darningneedle dragonflies.

Behind, a good half mile, trying to catch up, walking mysteriously wounded, the Gypsy, who whorlsymboled the dust.

And yet farther back came the janitorfather, now slowing himself with remembrances of age, now pacing swiftly young with thoughts of the brief first encounter and victory, carrying his left hand patted to his chest, chewing medicines as he went.

At the midway rim, Mr. Dark looked back as if an inner voice had named the stragglers in his widely separated maneuver. But the voice failed, he was unsure. He nodded briskly, and Dwarf, Skeleton, Jim, Will thrust through the crowd.

Jim felt the river of bright people wash by all around but not touching. Will heard waterfall laughter here, there, and him walking through the downpour. An explosion of fireflies blossomed on the sky; the ferris wheel, exultant as a titanic fireworks, dilated above them.

Then they were at the Mirror Maze and sidling,

coliding, bumping, careening through the unfolded ice ponds where stricken spiderstung boys much like themselves appeared, vanished a thousand times over.

That's me! thought Jim.

But I can't help me, thought Will, no matter how many of me there are!

And crowd of boys, plus crowd of reflected Mr. Dark's illustrations, for he had taken off his coat and shirt now, crammed and crushed through to the Waxworks at the end of the maze.

“Sit,” said Mr. Dark. “Stay.”

Among the wax figures of murdered, gunshot, guillotined, garroted men and women the two boys sat like Egyptian cats, unblinked, untwitched, unswallowing.

Some late visitors passed through, laughing. They commented on all the wax figures.

They did not notice the thin line of saliva crept from the comer of one “wax” boy's mouth.

They did not see how bright was the second “wax” boy's stare, which suddenly brimmed and ran clear water down his cheek.

Outside, the Witch limped in through back alleys of rope and peg between the tents.

“Ladies and gentlemen!”

The last crowd of the night, three or four hundred strong, turned as a body.

The Illustrated Man, stripped to the waist, all nightmare viper, sabertooth, libidinous ape, clotted vulture, all salmonsulphur sky rose up with annunciations:

“The last free event this evening! Come one! Come all!”

The crowd surged toward the main platform outside the freak tent, where stood Dwarf, Skeleton, and Mr. Dark.

“The Most Amazingly Dangerous, ofttimes FatalWorld Famous BULLET TRICK!”

The crowd gasped with pleasure.

“The rifles, if you please!”

The Thin One cracked wide a racked display of bright artillery.

The Witch, hurrying up, froze when Mr. Dark cried: “'And here, our deathdefier, the bulletcatcher who will stake her lifeMademoiselle Tarot!”

The Witch shook her head, bleated, but Dark's hand swept down to swing her like a child to the platform, still protesting, which gave Dark pause, but, in front of everyone

now, he went on:

"A volunteer, please, to fire the rifle!"

The crowd rumbled softly, daring itself to speak up.

Mr. Dark's mouth barely moved. Under his breath he asked, "Is the clock stopped?"

"Not," she whined, "stopped."

"No?" he almost burst out.

He burnt her with his eyes, then turned to the audience and let his mouth finish the spiel, his fingers rapping over the rifles.

"Volunteers, please!"

"Stop the act," the Witch cried softly, wringing, her hands.

"It goes on, damn you, worse than doubledamn you" he whispered, whistled fiercely.

Secretly, Dark gathered a pinch of flesh on his wrist, the illustration of a blacknun blind woman, which he bit with his fingernails.

The Witch spasmed, seized her breast, groaned, ground her teeth. "Mercy!" she hissed, half aloud.

Silence from the crowd.

Mr. Dark nodded swiftly.

"Since there are no volunteers-" He scraped his illustrated wrist. The Witch shuddered. "'We will cancel our last act and-"

"Here! A volunteer!"

The crowd turned.

Mr. Dark recoiled., then asked: "Where?"'

"Here."

Far out at the edge of the crowd, a hand lifted, a path opened.

Mr. Dark could see very clearly the man standing there, alone.

Charles Halloway, citizen, father, introspective husband, nightwanderer, and janitor of the town library.

47

The crowd's appreciative clamor faded.

Charles Halloway did not move.

He let the path grow leading down to the platform.

He could not see the expression on the faces of the freaks standing up there. His eyes swept the crowd and found the Mirror Maze, the empty oblivion which beckoned with

ten times a thousand million light years of reflections, counterreflections,, reversed and doublereversed, plunging deep to nothing, facefalling to nothing, stomachdropping away to yet more sickening plummets of nothing.

And yet, wasn't there an echo of two boys in the powdered silver at the back of each glass? Did or did he not perceive, with the tremulous tip of eyelash if not the eye, their passage through, their wait beyond, warm wax amongst cold, waiting to be keywound by terrors, run free in panics?

No. thought Charles Halloway, don't think. Get on with this!

“Coming!” he shouted.

“Go get 'em, Pop!” a man said.

“Yes,” said Charles Halloway. “ I will.”

And he walked down through the crowd.

The Witch spun slowly, magnetized at the nightwandering volunteer's approach. Her eyelids jerked at their sewn blackwax threads behind dark glasses.

Mr. Dark, the illustrationdrenched, superinfested civilization of souls, leaned from the platform, gladly whetting his lips. Thoughts spun fiery Catherine wheels in his eyes, quick, quick, what, what, what!

And the aging janitor, fixing a smile to his face like a white celluloid set of teeth from a Cracker Jack box, strode on, and the crowd opened as the sea before Moses and closed behind, and him wondering what to do? why was he here? but on the move, steadily, nevertheless.

Charles Halloway's foot touched the first step of the platform.

The Witch trembled secretly.

Mr. Dark felt this secret, glanced sharply. Swiftly he put his hand out to grab for the good right hand of this fiftyfouryearold man.

But the fiftyfouryearold man shook his head, would not give his hand to be held, touched, or helped up.

“Thanks, no.”

On the platform, Charles Halloway waved to the crowd.

The people set off a few firecrackers of applause.

“But-” Mr. Dark was amazed- “your left hand, sir, you can't hold and fire a rifle if you have only the use of one hand!”

Charles Halloway paled.

“I'll do it,” he said. “With one hand.”

“Hoorah!” cried a boy, below.

“Go it, Charlie!” a man called, out beyond.

Mr. Dark flushed as the crowd laughed and applauded even louder now. He lifted his hands to ward off the wave of refreshing sound, like rain that washed in from the people.

“All right, all right! Let's see if he can do it!”

Brutally, the Illustrated Man snapped a rifle from its locks, hurled it through the air.

The crowd gasped.

Charles Halloway ducked. He put up his right hand. The rifle slapped his palm. He grabbed. It did not fall. He had it good.

The audience hooted, said things against Mr. Dark's bad manners which made him turn away for a moment, damning himself, silently.

Will's father lifted the rifle, beaming.

The crowd roared.

And while the wave of applause came in, crashed, and went back down the shore, he looked again to the maze, where the sensed but unseen shadowshapes of Will and Jim were filed among titanic razor blades of revelation and illusion, then back to the Medusa gaze of Mr. Dark, swiftly reckoned with, and on to the stitched and jittering sightless nun of midnight, sidling back still more. Now she was as far as she could sidle, at the far end of the platform, almost pressed to the whorled redblack rifle bull'seye target.

“Boy!” shouted Charles Halloway.

Mr. Dark stiffened.

“I need a boy volunteer to help me hold the rifle!” shouted Charles Halloway.

“Someone! Anyone!” he shouted.

A few boys in the crowd shifted around on their toes.

“Boy!” shouted Charles Halloway. “Hold on. My son's out there. He'll volunteer, won't you, Will?”

The Witch flung one band up to feel the shape of this audacity which came off the fiftyfouryearold man like a fever. Mr. Dark was spun round as if hit by a fasttraveling gunshot.

“Will!” called his father.

In the Wax Museum, Will sat motionless.

“Will!” called his father. “Come on, boy!”

The crowd looked left, looked right, looked back.

No answer.

Will sat in the Wax Museum.

Mr. Dark observed all of this with some respect, some degree of admiration, some concern; he seemed to be waiting, just as was Will's father.

“Will, come help your old man!” Mr. Halloway cried, jovially.

Will sat in the Wax Museum.

Mr. Dark smiled.

“Will! Willy! Come here!”'

No answer.

Mr. Dark smiled more.

“Willy! Don't you hear your old man?”

Mr. Dark stopped smiling.

For this last was the voice of a gentleman in the, crowd, speaking up.

The crowd laughed.

“Will!” called a woman.

“Willy!” called another.

“Yoohoo!” A gentleman in a beard.

“Come on, William!” A boy.

The crowd laughed more, jostled elbows.

Charles Halloway called. They called. Charles Halloway cried to the hills. They cried to the hills.

“'Will! Willy! William!”

A shadow shuttled and wove in the mirrors.

The Witch broke out chandeliers of sweat.

“There!”

The crowd stopped calling.

As did Charles Halloway, choked on the name of his son now, and silent.

For Will stood in the entrance of the Maze, like the wax figure that he almost was.

“Will,” called his father, softly.

The sound of this chimed the sweat off the Witch.

Will moved, unseeing, through the crowd.

And handing the rifle down like a cane for the boy to grasp, his father drew him up onto the stand.

“Here's my good left hand!” announced the father.

Will neither saw nor heard the crowd sound forth a solid and offensive applause.

Mr. Dark had not moved, though Charles Halloway could see him, during all this, lighting and setting off cannon crackers in his head; but each, one by one, fizzled and died. Mr. Dark could not guess what they were up to. For that matter, Charles Halloway did not know or guess. It was as if

he had written this play for himself, over the years, in the library, nights, torn up the play after memorizing it, and now forgotten what he had set forth to remember. He was relying on secret discoveries of self , moment by moment, playing by ear, no! heart and soul! And . . . now?!

The brightness of his teeth seemed to strike the Witch blinder! Impossible! She flung one hand to her glasses, her sewn eyelids!

“Closer, everyone!” called Will's father.

The crowd gathered in. The platform was an island. The sea was people.

“'Watch the bull'seye targeteer!”

The Witch melted in her rags.

The Illustrated Man looked left, found no pleasure in the Skeleton, who simply looked thinner; found no pleasure looking right to a Dwarf who blandly dwelt in squashed idiot madness.

“The bullet, please!” Will's father said, amiably.

The thousand illustrations on his jerking horseflesh frame did not hear, so why should Mr. Dark?

“If you please,” said Charles Halloway. “The bullet? So I may knock that flea off the old Gypsy's wart!”

Will stood motionless.

Mr. Dark hesitated.

Out in the choppy sea, smiles flashed, here, there, a hundred, two hundred, three hundred whitenesses, as if a vast titillation of water had been provoked by a lunar gravity. The tide ebbed.

The Illustrated Man, in slow motion, proffered the bullet. His arm, a long molasses undulation, lazed to offer the bullet to the boy, to see if he would notice; he did not notice.

His father took the missile.

“Mark it with your initials,” said Mr. Dark, by rote.

“No, with more!” Charles Halloway raised his son's hand and made him hold the bullet, so he could take a penknife with his one good hand and carve a strange symbol on the lead.

What's happening? Will thought. I know what's happenmg. I don't know what's happening? What!?

Mr. Dark saw a crescent moon on the bullet, saw nothing wrong with such a moon, rammed it in the rifle, slapped the rifle back at Will's father, who once more caught it deftly.

“Ready, Will?”

The boy's peach face drowsed in the slightest nod.

Charles Halloway flicked a last glance at the maze, thought, Jim, you there still? Get ready!

Mr. Dark turned to go pat, conjure, calm his dustcrone friend, but cracked to a halt at the crack of the rifle being reopened, the bullet ejected by Will's father, to assure the audience it was there. It seemed real enough, yet he had read long ago that this was a substitute bullet, shaped of a very hard steelcolored crayon wax. Shot through the rifle it would dissolve out the barrel as smoke and vapor. At this very moment, having somehow switched bullets, the Illustrated Man was slipping the real marked bullet into the Witch's jerking fingers. She would hide it in her cheek. At the shot, she would pretend to jolt under the imagined impact, then reveal the bullet caught by her yellow rat teeth. Fanfare! Applause!

The Illustrated Man, glancing up, saw Charles Halloway with the opened rifle, the wax bullet. But instead of revealing what he knew, Mr. Halloway simply said, “”Let's cut our mark more clearly, eh, boy?"' And with his penknife, the boy holding the bullet in his senseless hand, he marked this fresh new wax unmarked bullet with the same mysterious crescent moon, then snapped it back into the rifle.

“Ready?!”

Mr. Dark looked to the Witch.

Who hesitated, then nodded, once, faintly.

“Ready!” announced Charles Halloway.

And all about lay the tents, the breathing crowds, the anxious freaks, a Witch iced with hysteria, Jim hidden to be found, an ancient mummy still seated glowing with blue fire in his electric chair, and a merrygoround waiting for the show to cease, the crowd to go, and the carnival to have its way with boys and janitor trapped if possible, and alone.

“Will,” said Charles Halloway conversationally, as he lifted the now suddenly heavy rifle. “Your shoulder here is my brace. Take the middle of the rifle, gently, with one hand. Take it, Will.” The boy raised a hand. “That's it, son. When I say 'hold,' hold your breath. Hear me?”

The boy's head tremored with the slightest affirmation.

He slept. He dreamed. The dream was nightmare. The nightmare was this.

And the next part of this was his father shouting:

“Ladies! Gentlemen!”

The illustrated Man clenched his fist. Will's picture, lost

in it., like a flower, was crushed.

Will twisted.

The rifle fell.

Charles Halloway pretended not to notice.

“Me and Will here will now, together, him being the good left arm I can't use, do the one and only most dangerous, sometimes fatal, Bullet Trick!”

Applause. Laughter.

Quickly the fiftyfouryearold janitor, denying each year, laid the rifle back on the boy's jerking shoulder.

“Hear that, Will? Listen! That's for us!”

The boy listened. The boy grew calm.

Mr. Dark tightened his fist.

Will was taken with slight palsy.

“We'll hit 'em bull'seye on, won't we, boy!” said his father.

More laughter.

And the boy grew very calm indeed, with the rifle on his shoulder, and Mr. Dark squeezed tight on the peachfuzz face nestled in the flesh of his hand, but the boy was serene in the laughter which still flowed and his father kept the hoop rolling thus:

“Show the lady your teeth, Will!”

Will showed the woman against the target his teeth. The blood fell away from the Witch's f ace.

Now Charles Halloway showed her his teeth, too, such as they were.

And winter lived in the Witch.

“'Boy,” said someone in the audience, “she's great. Acts scared! Look!”

"I'm looking, thought Will's father, his left hand useless at his side his right hand up to the rifle trigger, his face to the sight as his son held the rifle unswervingly pointed at the bull'seye and the Witch's face superimposed there, and the last moment come, and a wax bullet in the chamber, and what could a wax bullet do? A bullet that dissolved in transit, what use? why were they here, what could they do? silly, silly!

No! thought Will's father. Stop!

He stopped the doubts.

He felt his mouth shape words with no sound.

But, the Witch heard what he said.

Above the dying laughter, before the warm sound was completely goes, he made these words, silently with his lips:

The crescent moon I have marked on the bullet is not a crescent moon.

It is my own smile.

I have put my smile on the bullet in the rifle.

He said it once.

He waited for her to understand.

He said it, silently, again.

And in the moment before the Illustrated Man himself translated the mouthings, quickly, Charles Halloway cried, faintly, “Hold!” Will held his breath. Far back among wax statues, Jim, hid away, dripped saliva from his chin. Strapped in electric chair a deadalive mummy hummed power in its teeth. Mr. Dark's illustrations writhed with sick sweat as he clenched his fist a final time, buttoo late! Serene, Will held breath, held weapon. Serene, his father said, “Now.”

And fired the rifle.

48

One shot!

The Witch sucked breath.

Jim, in the Wax Museum, sucked breath.

As did Will, asleep.

As did his father.

As did Mr. Dark.

As did all the freaks.

As did the crowd.

The Witch screamed.

Jim among the wax dummies, blew all the air from his lungs.

Will shrieked himself awake, on the platform.

The Illustrated Man let the air from his mouth in a great angry bray, whipping up his hands to stop all events. But the Witch fell. She fell off the platform. She fell in the dust.

The smoking rifle in his one good hand, Charles Halloway let his breath go slow, feeling every bit of it move from him. He still stared along the rifle sights at the target where the woman had been.

At the platform rim, Mr. Dark looked down at the screaming crowd and what they were screaming about.

“She's fainted-”

“No. She slipped!”

“Shes . . . shot!”

At last Charles Halloway came to stand by the Illustrated Man, looking down. There were many things in his face: surprise, dismay, and some small strange relief and satisfaction.

The woman was lifted and put on the platform. Her mouth was frozen open, almost with a look of recognition.

He knew she was dead. In a moment, the crowd would know. He watched the Illustrated Man's hand move down to touch, trace, feel for life. Then Mr. Dark lifted both her hands, like a doll, in some marionette strategy, to give her motion. But the body refused.

So he gave one of the Witch's arms to the Dwarf, the other to the Skeleton, and they shook and moved them in a ghastly semblance of reawakening as the crowd backed.

". . . dead

“But . . . there's no wound.”

“Shock, you think?”

Shock, thought Charles Halloway, my God, did that kill her? Or the other bullet? When I fired the shot, did she suck the other bullet down her throat? Did she . . . choke on my smile! Oh, Christ!

“It's all right! Show's over! Just fainted!” said Mr. Dark. “All an act! All part of the, show,” he said, not looking at the woman, not looking at the crowd, but looking at Will, who stood blinking around, out of one nightmare and fresh into the next as his father stood with him and Mr. Dark cried: “Everyone home! Show's over! Lights! Lights!”

The carnival lights flickered.

The crowd, herded before the failing illumination, turned like a great carousel and as the lamps dimmed, hustled toward the few remaining pools of light as if to warm themselves there before braving the wind. One by one, one by one, the lights indeed were going off.

“Lights!” said Mr. Dark.

“Jump!” said Will's father.

Will jumped. Will ran with his father who still carried the, weapon that had fired the, smile that had killed the Gypsy and put her to dust.

“Is Jim in there?”

They were at the maze. Behind them, on the platform, Mr. Dark bellowed: “Lights! Go home! All over. Done!”

“Is Jim in there?” wondered Will. “Yes. Yes, he is!”

Inside the Wax Museum, Jim still had not moved, had not blinked.

“Jim!” The voice came through the maze.

Jim moved. Jim blinked. A rear exit door stood wide. Jim blundered toward it.

“I'm coming for you, Jim!”

“No, Dad!”

Will caught at his father, who stood at the first turn of the mirrors with the pain come back to his hands racing up along the nerves to strike a fireball near his heart. “Dad, don't go in!” Will gabbed his good arm.

Behind them, the platform was empty, Mr. Dark was running . . . where? Somewhere as the night shut in, the lights went off, went off, went off, the night sucked around, gathering, whistling, simpering, and the crowd, like a shake of leaves from one huge tree, blew off the midway, and Will's father stood facing the glass tides, the waves, the gauntlet of horror he knew waited for him to swim through, stride through to fight the desiccation, the annihilation of one's self that waited there. He had seen enough to know. Eyes shut, you'd be lost. Eyes open, you'd know such utter despair, such gravities of anguish would weight you, you might never drag past the twelfth turn. But Charles Halloway took Will's hands away. “Jim's there. Jim, wait! I'm coming in!”

And Charles Halloway took the next step into the maze.

Ahead flowed sluices of silver light, deep slabs of shadow, polished, wiped, rinsed with images of themselves and others whose souls, passing, scoured the glass with their agony, curried the cold ice with their narcissism, or sweated the angles and flats with their fear.

“Jim!”

He ran. Will ran. They stopped.

For the lights in here were going blind, one by one, going dim, changing color, now blue, now a color like lilac summer lightning which flared in haloes, then a flickerlight like a thousand ancient windblown candles.

And between himself and Jim in need of rescue, stood an army of one million sickmouthed, frosthaired, whitetinebearded men.

Them! all of them! he thought. That's me!

Dad! thought Will, at his back, don't be afraid. It's only you. All only my father!

But he did not like their look. They were so old, so very old, and got much older the farther away they marched, wildly gesticulating, as Dad threw up his hands to fend off the revelation, this wild image repeated to insanity.

Dad! he thought, it's you!

But, it was more.

And all the lights went out.

And both, squeezed still, in mufflegasping silence, stood afraid.

49

A hand dug like a mole in the dark.

Will's hand.

It emptied his pockets, it delved, it rejected, it dug again. For while it was dark he knew those million old men might march, hustle, rush, leap, smash Dad with what they were! In this shutup night, with just four seconds to think of them, they might do anything to Dad! If Will didn't hurry, these legions from Time Future, all the ,alarms of coming life, so mean, raw, and true you couldn't deny that's how Dad'd look tomorrow, next day, the day after the day after that, that cattle run of possible years might sweep Dad under!

So, quick!

Who has more pockets than a magician?

A boy.

Whose pockets contain more than a magician's?

A boy's.

Will seized forth kitchen matches!

“Oh God, Dad, here!”

He struck the match.

The stampede was close!

They had come running. Now, fixed by light, they widened their eyes, as did Dad, amazed their mouths at their own ancient quakes and masquerades. Halt! the match had cried. And platoons left, squads right, had stiltmuscled themselves to fitful rest, to baleful glare, itching for the match to whiff out. Then, given lease to run next time, they'd hit this old, very old, much older, terribly old man, suffocate him with Fates in one instant.

“No!” said Charles Halloway.

No. A million dead lips moved.

Will thrust the match forward. In the mirrors, a wizened multiplication of boyapes did likewise, posing a single rosebud of blueyellow flame.

“No!”

Every glass threw javelins of light which invisibly pierced, sank deep, found heart, soul, lungs, to frost the

veins, cut nerves, send Will to ruin, paralyze and then kickfootball heart. Hamstrung, the old old man foundered to his knees, as did his suppliant images, his congregation of terrified selves one week, one month, two years, twenty, fifty, seventy, ninety years from now! every second, minute, and longaftermidnight hour of his possible survival into insanity, there all sank grayer, more yellow as the mirrors ricocheted him through, bled him lifeless, mouthed him dry, then threatened to whiff him to skeletal dusts and litter his moth ashes to the floor.

"No!"

Charles Halloway struck the match from his son's hand. "Dad, don't."

For in the new dark, the restive herd of old men shambled forward, hearts hammering.

"Dad, we gotta see!"

He struck his second and final match.

And in the flare saw Dad sunk down, eyes clenched, fists tight, and all those other men who would have to shunt, crawl, scramble on knees once this last light was gone. Will grabbed his father's shoulder and shook him.

"Oh, Dad, Dad, I don't care how old you are, ever! I don't care what, I don't care anything! Oh, Dad," he cried, weeping. "I love you!"

At which Charles Halloway opened his eyes and saw himself and the others like himself and his son behind holding him, the flame trembling, the tears trembling on his face, and suddenly, as before, the image of the Witch, the memory of the library, defeat for one, victory for another, swam before him, mixed with sound of rifle, shot, flight of marked bullet, surge of fleeing crowd.

For only a moment longer he looked at all of himselves, at Will. A small sound escaped his mouth. A little larger sound escaped his mouth.

And then, at last, he gave the maze, the mirrors, and all Time ahead, Beyond, Around, Above, Behind, Beneath or squandered inside himself, the only answer possible.

He opened his mouth very wide, and let the loudest sound of all free.

The Witch, if she were alive, would have known that sound, and died again.

Jim Nightshade, out the back door of the maze lost on the carnival grounds, running, stopped.

The Illustrated Man, somewhere among the black tents, running, stopped.

The Dwarf froze.

The Skeleton turned.

All had heard.

Not the sound that Charles Halloway made, no.

But the terrific sounds that followed.

One mirror alone, and then a second mirror, followed by a pause, and then a third mirror, and a fourth and another after that and another after that and still another and another after that, in domino fashion, they formed swift spiderwebs over their fierce stares and then with faint tinkles and sharp cracks, fell.

One minute there was this incredible Jacob's ladder of glass, folding, refolding and folding away yet again images pressed in a book of light. The next, all shattered to meteor precipitation.

The Illustrated Man, halted, listening, felt his own eyes, crystal, almost spiderweb and splinter with the sounds.

It was as if Charles Halloway, once more a choirboy in a strange subsubdemon church had sung the most beautiful high note of amiable humor ever in his life which first shook mothsilver from the mirror backs, then shook images from glass faces, then shook glass itself to ruin. A dozen, a hundred, a thousand mirrors, and with them the ancient images of Charles Halloway, sank earthward in delicious moonfalls of snow and sleety water.

All because of the sound he had let come from his lungs through his throat out his mouth.

All because he accepted everything at last, accepted the carnival, the hills beyond, the people in the hills, Jim, Will, and above all himself and all of life, and, accepting, threw back his head for the second time tonight and showed his acceptance with sound.

And lo! like Jericho and the trump, with musical thunders the glass gave up its ghosts, Charles Halloway cried out, released. He took his hands from his face. Fresh starlight and dying carnival glow rushed in to set him free. The reflected dead men were gone, buried under the cymbaled slide, the splash and surfing of glass at his feet.

"'Lights . . . lights!"

A far voice cried away more warmth.

The Illustrated Man, unfrozen, vanished among the tents.

The crowd was now gone.

“Dad, what'd you do?”

But the match burned Will's fingers, he dropped it, but now there was dim light enough to see Dad shuffle the trash, stir the mess of mirrored glass, heading back through the empty places where the maze had been and was no more.

“Jim?”

A door stood open. Pale carnival illumination, fading, poured through to show them wax figures of murderers and murderess.

Jim did not sit among them.

“Jim!”

They stared at the open door through which Jim had run to be lost in the swarms of night between black canvases.

The last electric light bulb went out.

“We'll never find him now,”' said Will.

“Yes,” said his father, standing in the dark. “We'll find him.”

Where? Will thought, and stopped.

Far down the midway, the carousel steamed, the calliope tortured itself with musics.

There, thought Will. If Jim's anywhere, its there, to the music, old funny Jim, the freeride ticket hid in his pocket still, I bet! Oh, damn Jim, damn him, damn him! he cried, and then thought, no! don't you, he's damned already, or near it! So how do we find him in the dark, no matches, no lights, just the two of us, all of them, and us alone in their territory?

“How-” said Will, aloud.

But his father said “There,” very softly. With gratitude.

And Will stepped to the door, which was lighter now.

The moon! Thank God.

It was rising from the hills.

“The police . . . ?”

“No time. It's the next few minutes or nothing. Three people we got to worry about-”

“The freaks!”

“Three people, Will. Number one, Jim, number two, Mr. Cooger frying in his Electric Chair. Niunber three, Mr. Dark and his skinful of souls. Save one, kick the other two to hell and gone. Then I think the freaks go, too. You ready, Will?”

Will eyed the door, the tents, the dark, the sky with new light paling it.

"God bless the moon."

Hands tight together, they stepped out the door.

As if to greet them, the wind flung up and down all the tent canvases in a great prehistoric thunderkite display of leprous wings.

51

They ran in urine smell of shadow, they ran in clean ice smell of moon.

The calliope steamthrob whispered, tatted, trilled.

The music! thought Will, is it running backward or forward?

"Which way?" Dad whispered.

"Through here!" Will pointed.

A hundred yards off, beyond a foothill of tents, there was a flare of blue light, sparks jumped up and fell away, then dark again.

Mr. Electrico! Thought Will. They're trying to move him, sure! Get him to the merrygoround, kill or cure! And if they cure him, then, oh gosh, then, it's angry him and angry Illustrated Man against just Dad and me! And Jim? Well, where was Jim? This way one day, that way the next, and . . . tonight? Whose side would he wind up on? Ours! Old friend Jim! Ours, of course! But Will trembled. Did friends last forever, then? For eternity, could they be counted to a warm, round, and handsome sum?

Will glanced left.

The Dwarf stood half enfolded by tent flaps, waiting motionless.

"Dad, look," cried Will, softly. "And therethe Skeleton."

Further over, the tall man, the man all marble bone and Egyptian papyrus stood like a dead tree.

"The freakswhy don't they stop us?"

"Scared."

"Of us?!"

Will's father crouched and squinted out from around an empty cage.

"They're walking wounded, anyway. They saw what happened to the Witch. That's the only answer. Look at them."

And there they stood, like uprights, like tent poles

spotted all through the meadow grounds, hiding in shadow, waiting. For what? Will swallowed, hard. Maybe not hiding at all, but spread out for the running fight to come. At the right time, Mr. Dark would yell and they'd just circle in. But the time wasn't right. Mr. Dark was busy. When he'd done what must be done, then he'd give that yell. So? So, thought Will, we got to see he never yells at all.

Will's feet slithered in the grass.

Will's father moved ahead.

The freaks watched with moonglass eyes as they passed.

The calliope changed. It whistled sadly, sweetly, around a curve of tents, around a riverflow of darkness.

It's going ahead! thought Will. Yes! It was going backward. But now it stopped and started again, and this time forward! What's Mr. Dark up to?

“Jim!” Will burst out.

“Sh!” Dad shook him.

But the name had tumbled from his mouth only because he heard the calliope summing the golden years ahead, felt Jim isolate somewhere, pulled by warm gravities, swung by sunrise notes, wondering what it could be like to stand sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years tall, and then, oh then, nineteen and, most incredible! -twenty! The great wind of time blew in the brass pipes, a fine, a jolly, a summer tune, promising everything and even Will, hearing, began to run toward the music that grew up like a peach tree full of sunripe fruit-

No! he thought.

And instead made his feet step to his own fear, jump to his own tune, a hum cramped back by throat, held fast by lungs, which shook the bones of his head and drowned the calliope away.

“There,” said Dad softly.

And between the tents, ahead, in transit, they saw a grotesque parade. Like a dark sultan in a palanquin, a halffamiliar figure rode a chair borne on the shoulders of assorted sizes and shapes of darkness.

At Dad's cry, the parade jolted, then broke into a run!

“Mr. Electrico!” said Will.

They're taking him to the carousel!

The parade vanished.

A tent lay between them.

“Around here!” Will jumped, pulling his father. The

calliope played sweet. To pull Jim, to draw Jim. And when the parade arrived with Electrico? Back the music would spin, back the carousel run, to shard away his skin, to freshen forth his years! Will stumbled, fell. Dad picked him up.

And then . . .

There arose a human barking, yapping, baying, whining, as if all had fallen. In a longdrawn moan, a gasp, a shuddering sigh, an entire crowd of people with crippled throats made chorus together.

"Jim! They've got Jim!"

"No . . ." murmured Charles Halloway, strangely. "Maybe Jim . . . or us . . . got them."

They stepped around the last tent.

Wind blew dust in their faces.

Will clapped his hand up, squinched his nose. The dust was antique spice, burnt maple leaves, a prickling blue that teemed and sifted to earth. Swarming its own shadows, the dust filtered over the tents.

Charles Halloway sneezed. Figures jumped and scurried away from an upended, halftilted object abandoned halfway between one tent and the carousel.

The object was the electric chair, capsized, with straps dangling from wooden arms and legs, and a metal headcap hanging from its top.

"But," said Will. "Where's Mr. Electrico!? I mean Mr. Cooger!?"

"That must have been him."

"What must have been him?"

But the answer was there, sifting down the midway in the whorling wind devils . . . the burnt spice, the autumn incense that had floured them when they turned this comer.

Kill or cure, Charles Halloway thought. He imagined them rushed in the last few seconds, toting the ancient dustsack boneheap over starched grasses in his disconnected chair, perhaps only one in a running series of attempts to foster, encourage, preserve life in what was really nothing but a mortuary junkpile, rustflakes and dying coals that no wind could blow alight again. Yet they must try. How many times in the last twentyfour hours had they run out on such excursions, only, in panic, to cease activity because the merest jolt, the slightest breath, threatened to shake old ancient Cooger down to mealmush and chaff? Better to leave him propped in electricwarm chair, a continual exhibit, an evergoingon performance for gaping audiences, and try

again, but especially try now, when, lights out, and crowds herded off in the dark, all threatened by one smile on a bullet, there was need of Cooger as he once was, tall, flameheaded, and riven with earthquake violence. But somewhere, twenty seconds, ten seconds ago, the last glue crumbled, the last bolt of life fell free, and the mummydoll, the Erectorset grotesque disencumbered itself in smoke puffs and November leaflets, a broadcast of mortality along the wind. Mr. Cooger, threshed in a final harvest, was now a billion parchment flecks, tumbled seascrolls capered in meadows. A mere dust explosion in a silo of ancient grain: gone.

"Oh, no. no, no,, no,, no," someone murmured.

Charles Halloway touched Will's arm.

Will stopped saying "Oh, no, no, no." He, too, in the last few moments, had thought the same as his father, of the toted corpse, the strewn bonemeal, the mineralenriched hills of grass. . . .

Now there was only the empty chair and the last particles of mica, the radiant motes of peculiar dirt crusting the straps. And the freaks, who had been toting the baroque dump, now fled to shadows.

We made them run, thought Will, but something made them drop it!

No, not something. Someone.

Will flexed his eyes.

The carousel, deserted, empty, traveled on its way through its own special time, forward.

But between the fallen chair and the carousel, standing alone, was that a freak? No . . .

"Jim!"

Dad knocked his elbow and Will shut up.

Jim, he thought.

And where, now, was Mr. Dark?

Somewhere. For he had started the carousel, hadn't he? Yes! To draw them, to draw Jim, andwhat else? Right now there was no time, for-

Jim turned from the spilled chair, turned and walk slowly toward the free, free ride.

He was going where he had always known he must go.

Like a weather vane in wild seasons he had tremored this way, wandered that, hesitated upon bright horizons and warm directions, only at last now to tilt and, half sleepwalking, tremble about in the bright brass pull and

summer march of music. He could not look away.

Another step, and then another, toward the merrygoround, there went Jim.

"Go get him, Will," said his father.

Will went.

Jim raised his right hand.

The brass poles flashed by into the future, pulling the flesh like syrup, stretching the bones like taffy, the sunmetal color burning Jim's cheeks, flinting his eyes.

Jim reached. The brass poles flickknocked his fingernails, tinkling their own small tune.

"Jim!"

The brass poles chopped by in a yellow sunrise at night.

The music leaped in a clear fountain, high.

Eeeeeeeeeeeeee.

Jim opened his mouth with the same cry:

"Eeeeeeeeeeeee!"

"Jim!" cried Will, running.

Jim's palm slapped one brass pole. The pole whipped on.

He slapped another brass pole. This time, his palm glued itself tight.

Wrist followed fingers, arm followed wrist, shoulder and body followed arm. Jim, sleepwalked, was torn from his roots in the earth.

"Jim!"

Will reached, felt Jim's foot flick from his grasp.

Jim swung round the waiting night in a great dark summer circle, Will racing after.

"Jim, get off! Jim, don't leave me here!"

Flung by centrifuge, Jim grasped the pole with one hand, spun, and, as if by some lone lost and final instinct, gestured his other hand free to trail on the wind, the one part of him, the small white separate part that still remembered their friendship.

"Jim, jump!!"

Will snatched for that hand, missed, stumbled, almost fell. The first race was lost. Jim must circle once, alone. Will stood waiting the next charge of horses, the flingabout of boy notsomuch boy-

"Jim! Jim!"

Jim awoke! Circled half round, his face showed now July, now December. He seized the pole, bleating out his

despair. He wanted, he did not want. He wished, he rejected, he ardently wished again, in flight, in heatspell river of wind and blaze of metal, in jog of July and August horses whose hoofs thudded the air like thrown fruit, his eyes blazed. Tongue clamped in teeth, he hissed his frustration.

“”Jim! Jump! Dad, stop the machine!"

Charles Halloway turned to see where the control box stood, fifty feet off.

“Jim!” Will's side was stabbed with pain. “'I need you! Come back!”

And, far over away on the far side of the carousel, traveling, fasttraveling, Jim fought with his own hands, the pole, the empty windwhipped journey, the growing night, the wheeling stars. He let go the pole. He grabbed it. And still his right hand trailed down and out, begging Will's last full ounce of strength.

“Jim!”

Jim came around. There, below, in the blacknight station from which this train pulled away forever in a flurry of ticketpunch confetti, he saw WillWillyWilliam Halloway, young pal, young friend who would seem younger still at the end of this journey, and not just young but unknown! vaguely remembered from some other time in some other year . . . but now that boy, that friend, that younger friend, ran along by the train, reached up, asking passage? or demanding he get off? which?!

“Jim! Remember me?”

Will lunged his final lunge. Fingers touched fingers, palm touched palm.

Jim's face, white cold, stared down.

Will trotpaced the circling machine.

Where was Dad? Why didn't he shut it off?

Jim's hand was a warm hand, a familiar, a good hand. It closed on his. He gripped it yelling.

“Jim, please!”

But still they spun on the journey, Jim borne, Will dragged in a jogcrazytrot.

“Please!”

Will jerked. Jim jerked. Trapped by Jim, Will's hand was shot with July heat. It went, like a kept animal, held and fondled by Jim, along, around, into older times. So his hand, fartraveling, would be alien to himself, knowing things by night that he himself, abed, might only guess. Fourteenyear boy, fifteenyear hand! Jim had it, yes! cramped it tight,

would not let go! And Jim's face, was it older, from the journey round? Was he fifteen now, going on sixteen!?

Will pulled. Jim pulled opposite.

Will fell on the machine.

Both rode the night.

All of Will rode with friend Jim now.

"Jim! Dad!"

How easy it might be to just stand, ride, go round with Jim, if he couldn't pull Jim off, just leave him on and, dear pals, travel! The juices of his body swam, binding his sight, they drummed his ears, shot electric jolts through his loins. . . .

Jim shouted. Will shouted.

They traveled half a year in slithering orchardwarm dark before Will seized Jim's arm tight and dared to leap from so much promise, so many fine tallgrowing years, flail out, off, down, pull Jim with. But Jim could not let go the pole, could not give up the ride.

"Will!"

Jim, half between machine and friend, one hand on each, screamed.

It was like a great tearing of cloth or flesh.

Jim's eyes went blind as a statue's.

The carousel whirled.

Jim screamed, fell, spun crazily, on the air.

Will tried to break his fall, but Jim struck earth rolling. He lay, silent.

Charles Halloway hit the carousel control switch. Empty, the machine slowed. Its horses paced themselves down from their trot toward some far midsummer night.

Together, Charles Halloway and his son knelt by Jim to touch his wrist, to put ear to his chest. Jim's eyes, skinned white, were fixed on the stars.

"Oh. God," cried Will. "Is he dead?"

"Dead . . . ?"

Will's father moved his hand over that cold face, the cold chest.

"'I don't feel . . .

A long way off, someone cried for help.

They looked up.

A boy came running down the midway bumping into

the ticket booths, falling over tent ropes, looking back over his shoulder.

"Help! He's after me!" the boy cried. "The terrible man! The terrible man! I want to go home!"

The boy flung himself forward, and grabbed at Will's father.

"Oh, help, I'm lost, I don't like it. Take me home. That man with the tattoos!"

"'Mr. Dark!" gasped Will.

"Yes!" gibbered the boy. "He's down that way! Oh, stop him!"

"Will-" his father rose-"take care of Jim. Artificial respiration. All right, boy."

The boy trotted off. "This way!"

Following, Charles Halloway watched the distraught boy who led him; observed his head, his frame, the way his pelvis hung from his spine.

"Boy," he said, by the shadowed merrygoround, twenty feet around from where Will bent to Jim. "What's your name?"

"No time!" cried the boy. "Jed. Quick, quick!"

Charles Halloway stopped.

"Jed," he said. The boy no longer moved, but turned, chafing his elbows. "How old are you, Jed?"

"Nine!" said the boy. "My gosh, this is no time! We-"

"This is a fine time, Jed," said Charles Halloway. "Only nine? So young. I was never that young."

"Holy cow!" shouted the boy, angrily.

"Or unholy something," said the man, and reached out. The boy backed away. "You're only afraid of one man, Jed. Me."

"You?" The boy still backed off. "Cut it out! Why, why?"

"Because, sometimes good has weapons and evil none. Sometimes tricks fail. Sometimes people can't be picked off, led to deadfalls. No divideandconquer tonight, Jed. Where were you taking me, Jed? To some lion's cage you got fixed and ready? To some side show, like the mirrors? To someone like the Witch? What, what, Jed, what? Let's just roll up your right shirt sleeve, shall we, Jed?"

The great moonstone eyes flashed at Charles Halloway.

The boy leaped back, but not before the man had leaped with him, seized his arm, grabbed the back of his shirt and instead of simply rolling up the sleeve as first suggested,

tore the entire shirt off the boy's body.

"Why, yes, Jed," said Charles Halloway, almost quietly. "Just as I thought."

"You, you, you, you!"

"Yes, Jed, me. But especially you, look at you."

And look he did.

For there, on the back of the small boy's hand, on the fingers, and up along the wrist scrambled blue serpents, bluevenomed snake eyes, blue scorpions scuttling about blue shark maws which gaped eternally hungry to feed upon all the freaks crammed and stungsewn cheek by jowl, skin to skin, flesh to flesh all up and down the chest, the tiny torso, and tucked in the secret gathering places on this small small very small body, this cold and now shocked and trembling body.

"Why, Jed, that's fine artwork, that is."

"You!" The boy struck.

"Yes, still me." Charles Halloway took the blow in the face and clamped a vise, on the boy.

"No!"

"Oh, yes," said Charles Halloway, using just his good right hand, his ruined left hand hanging limp. "Yes, Jed, jump, squirm, go ahead. It was a fine idea. Get me off alone, fix me, then go back and get Will. And when the police come, why, you're just a boy nine or ten and the carnival, oh, no, it's not yours, doesn't belong to you. Stay here, Jed. Why you trying to get out from under my arm? The police look and the owners of the show have vanished, isn't that it., Jed? A fine escape."

"You can't hurt me!" the boy shrieked.

"Funny," said Charles Halloway. "I think I can"

He pressed the boy, almost lovingly, close, very close.

"Murder!" wailed the boy. "Murder."

"I'm not going to murder you, Jed, Mr. Dark, whoever, whatever you are. You're going to murder yourself because you can't stand being near people like me, not this close, close, not this long."

"Evil!" groaned the boy, writhing. "You're evil!"

"Evil?" Will's father laughed, which made the boy, waspstung and brambled by the sound, jerk all the more violently. "Evil?" The man's hands were flypaper fastened to the small bones. "Strange hearing that from you, Jed. So it must seem. Good to evil seems evil. So I will do only good to you, Jed. I will simply hold you and watch you poison

yourself. I will do good to you, Jed, Mr. Dark, Mr. Proprietor, boy, until you tell what's wrong with Jim. Wake him up. Let him free. Give him life!"

"Can't . . . can't. . . . " The boy's voice fell down a well inside his body, fading away, away "can't. . . ."

"You mean you won't?"

" . . . can't . . ."

"All right, boy, all right, then here and here and this and this . . ."

They looked like father and son long apart, passionately met, embraced, yet more embraced, as the man lifted his wounded hand to gently touch the stricken face as the crowd, the teem, of illustrations shivered and flew now this way and that in microscopic forays quickly abandoned. The boy's eyes swiveled wildly, fixed upon the manes mouth. He saw there the strange and somehow lovely smile once flung as beatification to the Witch.

He gathered the boy somewhat closer and thought, Evil has only the power that we give it. I give you nothing. I take back. Starve. Starve. Starve.

The two matchstick lights in the boy's affrighted eyes blew out.

The boy, and his stricken and bruised conclave of monsters, his felt but halfseen crowd, fell to earth.

There should have been a roar like a mountain slid to ruin.

But there was only a rustle, like a Japanese paper lantern dropped in the dust.

53

Charles Halloway stood for a long while, breathing deep, lungs aching, looking down at the body. The shadows swooned and fluttered in all the canvas alleys where odd assorted sizes of freaks and people, fleshed in their own terrors and sins, held to poles, moaning in disbelief. Somewhere, the Skeleton moved out in the light. Somewhere else, the Dwarf almost knew who he was, and scuttled forth like a crab from a cave to blink and blink again at Will bent working over Jim, at Will's father bent to exhaustion over the still form of the silent boy, while the merrygoround, at last, slow, slow, came to a stop, rocking like a ferryboat in the wateryblowing grass.

The carnival was a great dark hearth lit with gathered

coals, as shadows came to stare and fire their gaze with the tableau by the carousel.

There in the moonlight lay the, illustrated boy named Dark.

There lay dragons slaughtered, towers ruined, monsters from dim ages toppled into rusted coinages pterodactyls smashed like biplanes from old and always meaningless wars, crustacea the color of emeralds abandoned on a white sand shore where the tide of life was going out, all, all the illustrations changing now, shifting, shriveling as the small flesh cooled. There the obscene wink of the navel eye gasped in on itself, there the nippleiris of a trumpeting mastodon went blind and raved at its blindness; each and every picture remembered from the tall Mr. Dark now rendered down to miniature canvas pronged and forked over a boy's tennisracket bones.

More freaks, with faces the color of beds where so many had lost the battle of souls, emerged from the shadows to glide in a great and ever more curious carousel motion about Charles Halloway and his dropped burden.

Will paused in his desperate push and relaxation, push and relaxation, trying to shape Jim back to life, unafraid of the watchers in the dark, no time for that! Even if there were time, these freaks, he sensed, were breathing the night as if they had not been fed on such rare fine air in years!

And as Charles Halloway watched, and the foxfire, lobstermoist, phlegmtrapped eyes watched from distances, the boywhohadbeenMr.-Dark grew yet colder, as death cut the timbers of nightmares, and the calligraphies, the smoky lightnings of sketch that coiled and crouched and soared like terrible banners of a lost war, began to vanish one by one from the strewn small body.

A score of freaks glanced fearfully round as if the moon had suddenly filled itself full and they could see; they chafed their wrists as if chains had fallen from them, chafed their necks as if weights had crumbled from their bowed shoulders. Stumbled forth after long entombments, they blinked swiftly, disbelieving the packet of their misery sprawled near the spent carousel. If they dared they might have bent to tremble their hands over that suddenly deathsweet mouth, the marbling brow. As it was they watched, benumbed, as their portrait pictures, the vital stuffs of their mortal greed, rancor, and poisonous guilt, the emerald abstracts of their selfblinded eyes, selfwounded

mouths, selftrapped bodies melted one by one from this insignificant mound of snow. There melted the Skeleton! there the sidewisescuttling crayfish Dwarf! Now the Lava Sipper took leave of autumn flesh, followed by the black Executioner from London Dock, there soared off and gone went the Human Montgolfier, the Balloon Man, Avoirdupois the Magnificent! deflated to purest air, there! there fled mobs and bands, as death washed the drawing board clean!

Now there lay just a plain dead boy, unbruised by pictures, staring up at the stars with Mr. Dark's empty eyes.

"Ahhhh . . ."

In a chorus of release, the strange people in the shadows sighed.

Perhaps the calliope gave a last ringmaster's bark. Perhaps thunder turned, sleeping, in the clouds. Suddenly all wheeled about. The freaks stampeded. North, south, east, west, free of tent, master, dark law, free above all of each other, they ran like albino pigs, tuskless boars, and stricken sloths before storms.

It must have been, it seemed, each yanked a rope, loosed a tentpeg, running.

For now the sky was shaken with a fatal respiration, the breathing down, the insunk rattle and pule of collapsing darkness as the tents gave way.

With hiss of viper, swirl of cobra, the ropes insanely raveled, slithered, snapped, cut grass with frictioned whips.

The networks of the vast Main Freak Tent convulsed, parted bones, small from medium, and medium from brontosaur magnificent. All swayed with impending fall.

The menagerie tent shut up like a dark Spanish fan.

Other small tents, caped figures in the meadow, fell down at the wind's command.

Then at last, the Freak Tent, the great melancholy mothering reptile bird, after a moment of indecision, sucked in a Niagara of blizzard air, broke loose three hundred hempen snakes, crackrattled its black sidepoles so they fell like teeth from a cyclopean jaw, slammed the air with acres of moldered wing as if trying to kite away but, earthtethered, must succumb to plain and most simple gravity, must be crushed by its own locked bulk.

Now this greatest tent stated out hot raw breaths of earth, confetti that was ancient when the canals of Venice were not yet staked, and wafts of pink cotton candy like tired feather boas. In rushing downfalls, the tent shed skin;

grieved, soughed as flesh fell away until at last the tall museum timbers at the spine of the discarded monster dropped with three cannon roars.

The calliope simmered, moronic with wind.

The train stood, an abandoned toy, in a field.

The freak oil paintings clapped hands high on the last standing pennant poles, then plummeted to earth.

The Skeleton, the only strange one left, bent to pick up the body of the porcelain boywhowasMr. Dark. He moved away into the fields.

Will, in a swift moment, saw the thin man and his burden go over a hill among all the footprints of the vanished carnival race.

Will's face shadowed this way, then that, pulled by the swift concussions, the tumults, the deaths, the fleeing away of souls. Cooger, Dark, Skeleton, DwarfwhowasLightningRodSalesman, don't run, come back! Miss Foley, where are you? Mr. Crosetti! it's over! Be still! Quiet! It's all right. Come back, come back!

But the wind was blowing their footprints out of the grass and they might run forever now trying to outflee themselves.

So Will turned back astride Jim and pushed the chest and let go, pushed and let go, then, trembling, touched his dear friend's cheek.

“Jim . . . ?”

But Jim was cold as spaded earth.

54

Beneath the cold was a fugitive warmness, in the white skin lay some small color, but when Will felt Jim's wrist there was nothing and when he put his ear to the chest there was nothing.

“He's dead!”

Charles Halloway came to his son and his son's friend and knelt down to touch the quiet throat, the unstirred rib cage.

“No.” Puzzled. “Not quite . . .”

“Dead!”

The tears burst from Wills eyes. But then, as swiftly, be felt himself knocked, struck, shaken.

“Stop that!” cried his father. “You want to save him?!”

“It's too late, oh, Dad!”

"Shut up! Listen!"

But Will wept.

And again his father hauled off and hit him. Once on the left cheek. Once on the right cheek, hard.

All the tears in him were knocked flying; there were no more.

"Will!" His father savagely jabbed a finger at him and at Jim. "Damn it, Willy, all this, all these, Mr. Dark and his sort, they like crying, my God, they love tears! Jesus God, the more you bawl, the more they drink the salt off your chin. Wail and they suck your breath like cats. Get up! Get off your knees, damn it! Jump around! Whoop and holler! You hear! Shout, Will, sing, but most of all laugh, you got that, laugh!"

"I can't!"

"You must! It's all we got. I know! In the library! The Witch ran, my God, how she ran! I shot her dead with it. A single smile, Willy, the night people can't stand it. The sun's there. They hate the sun. We can't take them seriously, Will!"

"But-"

"But hell! You saw the mirrors! And the mirrors shoved me half in, half out the grave. Showed me all wrinkles and rot! Blackmailed me! Blackmailed Miss Foley so she joined the grand march Nowhere, joined the fools who wanted everything! Idiot thing to want: everything! Poor damned fools. So wound up with nothing like, the dumb dog who dropped his bone to go after the reflection of the bone in the pond. Will, you saw: every mirror fell. Like ice in a thaw. With no rock or rifle, no knife, just my teeth, tongue and lungs, I gunshot those mirrors with pure contempt! Knocked down ten million scared fools and let the real man get to his feet! Now, on your feet, Will!"

"But Jim-" Will faltered.

"Half in, half out. Jim's been that, always. Soretempted. Now he went too far and maybe he's lost. But he fought to save himself, right? Put his hand out to you, to fall free of the machine? So we finish that fight for him. Move!"

Will sailed up, giddily, yanked.

"Run!"

Will sniffed again. Dad slapped his face. Tears flew like meteors.

"Hop! Jump! Yell!"

He banged Will ahead, shuffled with him, shoved his hand in his pockets, tearing them inside out until he pulled forth a bright object.

The harmonica.

Dad blew a chord.

Will stopped, staring down at Jim.

Dad clouted him on the car.

“Run! Don't look!”

Will ran a step.

Dad blew another chord, yanked Will's elbow, flung each of his arms.

“Sing!”

“What?”

“God, boy, anything!”

The harmonica tried a bad “Swanee River.”

“Dad.” Will shuffled, shaking his head, immensely tired. “Silly . . . !”

“Sure! We want that! Silly damn fool man! Silly harmonica! Bad offkey tune!”

Dad whooped. He circled like a dancing crane. He was not in the silliness yet. He wanted to crack through. He had to break the moment!

“Will: louder, funnier, as the man said! Oh, hell, don't let them drink your tears and want more! Will! Don't let them take your crying, turn it upside down and use it for their own smile! I'll be damned if death wears my sadness for glad rags. Don't feed them one damn thing, Willy, loosen your bones! Breathe! Blow!”

He seized Will's hair, shook him.

“Nothing . . . funny. . .”

“Sure there is! Me! You! Jim! All of us! The whole shooting works! Look!”

And Charles Halloway pulled faces, popped his eyes, mashed his nose, winked, cavorted like chimpanzeeape, waltzed with the wind, tapdanced the dust, threw back his head to bay at the moon, dragging Will with him.

“Death's funny, God damn it! Bend, two, three, Will. Softshoe. Way down upon the Swanee Riverwhat's next, Will? . . . Far far away! Will, your Godawful voice! Damn girl soprano. Sparrow in a tin can. Jump, boy!”

WM went up, came down, cheeks hotter, a wincing like lemons in his throat. He felt balloons grow in his chest.

Dad sucked the silver harmonica.

“That's where the old folks-” Will spoke.

“Stay!” bellowed his father.

Shuffle, tap, bounce, jog.

Where was Jim! Jim was forgotten.

Dad jabbed his ribs, tickling.

“De Camptown ladies sing this song!”

“Doodah!” yelled Will. “Doodah!” he sang it now, with a tune. The balloon grew. His throat tickled.

“Camptown race track, five miles long!”

“Oh, doodah day!”

Man and boy did a minuet.

And in midstep it happened.

Will felt the balloon grow huge within him.

He smiled.

“'What?” Dad was surprised by those teeth.

Will snorted. Will giggled.

“What say?” asked Dad.

The force of the exploding warm balloon alone shoved Will's teeth apart, kicked his head back.

“Dad! Dad!”

He bounded. He grabbed his Dad's hand. He raced crazily, hollering, quacking like a duck, clucking like a chicken. His palms hit his throbbing knees. Dust flow off his soles.

“Oh, Susanna!”

“Oh, don't you cry-”

“-for me!”

“For I'm come from-”

“Alabama with my-”

“Banjo on my-”

Together. “Knee!”

The harmonica knocked teeth, wheezing, Dad hocked forth great chords of squeezeeyed hilarity, turning in a circle, jumping up to kick his heels.

“Ha!” They collided, halfcollapsed, knocked elbows, cracked heads, which blew the air out faster. “Ha! Oh God, ha! Oh God. Will, Ha! Weak! Ha!”

In the middle of wild laughter-

A sneeze!

They spun. They stared.

Who lay there on the moonlit earth?

Jim? Jim Nightshade?

Had he stirred? Was his mouth wider, his eyelids quivering? Were his cheeks pinker?

Don't took! Dad swung Will handily round in a further reel. They dosidoed, hands extended, the harmonica seeping and guzzling raw tunes from a father who storked his legs and turkeyed his arms. They hopped Jim one way, hopped

back, as if he were but a lumpstone on the grass.

"Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah! Someone's in the kitchen-"

"-I knowohohoh!"

Jim's tongue slid out on his lips.

No one saw this. Or if they saw, ignored it, fearing it might pass.

Jim did the final things himself. His eyes opened. He watched the dancing fools. He could not believe. He had been off on a journey of years. Now, returned, no one said "Hi!" All jigged Sambostyle. Tears might have jumped to his eyes. But before they could start, Jim's mouth curved. He gave up a ghost of laughter. For, after all there indeed was silly Will and his silly old janitor dad racing like gorillas knuckledusting the meadows, their faces a puzzlement. They toppled above him, clapped bands, wiggled cars, bent to wash him all over with their now bright fullriver flowing laughter that could not be stopped if the sky fell or the earth rent open, to blend their good mirth with his, to fuselight and set him off in a detonation which could not stop exploding from ladyfingers to fourinchers to doomsday cannon crackers of delight!

And looking down, joltdancing his bones loose and delicious. Will thought: Jim don't remember he was dead, so we won't tell, not nowsome day, sure, but not . . . Doodah! Doodah!

They didn't even say "Hello, Jim" or "Join in the dance," they just put out hands as if he had fallen from their swung pandemonium commotion and needed a boost back into the swarm. They yanked Jim. Jim flew. Jim came down dancing.

And Will knew, hand in hand, hot palm to palm, they had truly yelled, sung, gladly shouted the live blood back. They had slung Jim like the newborn, knocked his lungs, slapped his back, shocked joyous breath to where it made room.

Then Dad bent and Will leaped over him and Will bent and Dad jumped him and they both waited crouched in a line, wheezing songs, deliciously tired, while Jim swallowed spit, and ran full tilt. He got half over Dad when they all fell, rolled in the grass, all hootowl and donkey, all brass and cymbal as it must have been the first year of Creation, and Joy not yet thrown from the Garden.

Until at last they drew up their feet, socked each

other's shoulders, embraced knees tight, rocking, and looking with swift bright happiness at each other, growing winedrunkenly quiet.

And when they were done smiling at each other's faces as at burning torches, they looked away across the field.

And the black tent poles lay in elephant boneyards with the dead tents blowing away like the petals of a great black rose.

The only three people in a sleeping world, a rare trio of tomcats, they basked in the moon.

“What happened?” asked Jim, at last.

“What didn't!” cried Dad.

And they laughed again, when suddenly Will grabbed Jim, held him tight and wept.

“Hey,” Jim said, over and over, quietly. “'Hey hey . . .”

“Jim, Jim,” Will said. “We'll be pals forever.”

“Sure, hey sure.” Jim was very quiet now.

“It's all right,” said Dad. “Have a small cry. We're out of the woods. Then we'll laugh some more, going home.”

Will let Jim go.

They got to their feet and stood looking at each other Will examined his father, with fierce pride.

“Oh, Dad, Dad, you did it, you did it!”

“No, we did it together.”

“But without you it'd all be over. Oh, Dad, I never knew you. I sure know you now.”

“Do you, Will?”

“Darn right!”

Each, to the other, shimmered in bright halos of wet light.

“Why then, hello. Reply, son, and curtsey.”

Dad held out his hand. Will shook it. Both laughed and wiped their eyes, then looked quickly at the foot prints scattered in the dew over the hills.

“Dad, will they ever come back?”

“No. And yes.” Dad tucked away his harmonica. “No not them. But yes, other people like them. Not in a carnival. God knows what shape they'll come in next. But sunrise, noon, or at the latest, sunset tomorrow they'll show. They're on the road.”

“Oh, no,” said Will.

“Oh, yes, said Dad. ”We got to watch out the rest of our lives. The fight's just begun."

They moved around the carousel slowly.

"'What will they look like? How will we know them?"

"Why," said Dad, quietly, "maybe they're already here."

Both boys looked around swiftly.

But there was only the meadow, the machine, and themselves.

Will looked at Jim, at his father, and then down at his own body and hands. He glanced up at Dad.

Dad nodded, once, gravely, and then nodded at the carousel, and stepped up on it, and touched a brass pole.

Will stepped up beside him. Jim stepped up beside Will.

Jim stroked a horse's mane. Will patted a horse's shoulders.

The great machine softly tilted in the tides of night.

Just three times around, ahead, thought Will. Hey.

Just four times around, ahead, thought Jim. Boy.

Just ten times around, back, thought Charles Halloway. Lord.

Each read the thoughts in the other's eyes.

How easy, thought Will.

Just this once, thought Jim.

But then, thought Charles Halloway, once you start, you'd always come back. One more ride and one more ride. And, after awhile, you'd offer rides to friends, and more friends until finally . . .

The thought hit them all in the same quiet moment.

. . . finally you wind up owner of the carousel, keeper of the freaks . . . proprietor for some small part of eternity of the traveling dark carnival shows. . . .

Maybe, said their eyes, they're already here.

Charles Halloway stepped back into the machinery of the merrygoround, found a wrench, and knocked the flywheels and cogs to pieces. Then he took the boys out and he hit the control box one or two times until it broke and scattered fitful lightnings.

"Maybe this isn't necessary," said Charles Halloway. "Maybe it wouldn't run anyway, without the freaks to give it power. But-" He hit the box a last time and threw down the wrench.

"It's late. Must be midnight straight up."

Obediently, the City Hall clock, the Baptist church clock, the Methodist, the Episcopalian, the Catholic church, all the clocks, struck twelve. The wind was seeded with Time.

“Last one to the railroad semaphore at Green Crossing is an old lady!”

The boys fired themselves off like pistols.

The father hesitated only a moment. He felt the vague pain in his chest. If I run, he thought, what will happen? Is Death important? No. Everything that happens before Death is what counts. And we've done fine tonight. Even Death can't spoil it. So, there went the boys and why not . . . follow?

He did just that.

And Lord! it was fine printing their life in the dew on the cool fields that new dark suddenlylikeChristmas morning. The boys ran as tandem ponies, knowing that someday one would touch base first, and the other second or not at all, but now this first minute of the new morning was not the minute or the day or morning of ultimate loss. Now was not the time to study faces to see if one was older and the other too much younger. Today was just another day in October in a year suddenly better than anyone supposed it could ever be just a short hour ago, with the moon and the stars moving in a grand rotation toward inevitable dawn, and them loping, and the last of this night's weeping done, and Will laughing and singing and Jim giving answer line by line, as they breasted the waves of dry stubble toward a town where they might live another few years across from each other.

And behind them jogged a middleaged man with his own now solemn, now amiable, thoughts.

Perhaps the boys slowed. They never knew. Perhaps Charles Halloway quickened his pace. He could not say.

But, running even with the boys, the middleaged man reached out.

Will slapped, Jim slapped, Dad slapped the semaphore signal base at the same instant.

Exultant, they banged a trio of shouts down the wind.

Then, as the moon watched, the three of them together left the wilderness behind and walked into the town.